

A/N: Welcome to my story! Settle in...it's going to be a long ride! I've been nervous about posting because this is my baby, but I think it's time to post, seeing as I've written over 120,000 words so far! This is a completely AU story and a truly ensemble fic. Everyone will be making appearances! I know the prologue gives you little to go on, so I'll be posting the first chapter soon! Thanks, and please review!

Prologue

"Look at him, James," Lily laughed as her pyjama-clad boy looked hopefully to his toy broom resting in the corner of the room. "No more tonight, Sweetheart. It's time for bed," she chided gently and ruffled his hair, smiling contently as she once more admired just how much he resembled James. Judging by the interest in the toy broom, a gift from his godfather, Harry had more than just his looks in common with his daddy, and Lily really wouldn't have it any other way.

James Potter had once been the bane of Lily's existence. She hadn't known it then, hadn't understood the workings of her own mysterious heart, but the intense irritation, the way he needled under her skin so easily, the way he could always bring an infuriated blush to her cheeks...it was the beginning of something. He was arrogant and a troublemaker, but as time and circumstance moulded him into a man, other forces were at work in her life, drawing her to the quiet strength that lurked beneath the mischievous exterior, pulling her towards the good, honest, pure heart of the man who had become her husband. Oh, James was still childish and excitable, and he could still turn her temper on a dime, but she loved him just as he was, and if Harry turned out to be half the man his father was, Lily knew he'd make them both so proud.

"Just like his old man," James beamed. "What do you think, Harry? Mummy will never let you be a Beater. She thinks it's barbaric," he winked at his son.

"Dangerous," she corrected. "If you insist on allowing my little boy to zoom around like a madman, at least spare my heart a bit."

"He's a natural, Love," her husband assured her. "Just like Daddy, right, Harry?"

Harry cooed in agreement, and Lily rolled her eyes. "Must I remind you precisely how many times my heart was in my throat watching you? Or the number of bones Madam Pomfrey set right after you'd done something completely reckless?"

"Mmm, did you ever think perhaps it was all that concern from my favourite redhead that led me to death-defying stunts? What better way to convince you that you loved me than to make you fear for my life?"

"Prat," she accused and gathered Harry closer. "My little boy would never torture his mummy like that."

"He can be a Chaser, like me," James conceded. "Although, he's rather quick even with the baby broom. What do you say, mate? Want to be a Seeker?"

Harry just laughed happily, and both parents forgot all about Quidditch positions as they set out to keep him laughing. He was such a happy baby, rarely ever distraught about anything unless they took his broom or his stuffed dog away. Both were gifts from Sirius, and Harry loved them nearly as much as he loved his godfather. Their little boy was full of affection, and Lily reminded herself each day to cherish the moments when she could cuddle with her sweet baby. Too soon he would be grown, and she knew he was going to be a handful, just like James. He wouldn't always relish in hugs and kisses and cuddles, but for now, his world still revolved around the adults who kept him safe and never tired of his smile or happy laughter.

James pulled out his wand and started creating little shapes for Harry to catch, and Lily carefully placed her son on the sofa and kept an eye on him as they played. It was nearly his bedtime, and she knew she would have to cut the game off soon. The only time Harry got cranky was when he was overtired, and even though he was happy now, he hadn't napped well today and would wear himself out any moment.

Thankfully, someone else ended the game for her. "Prongs?" a familiar voice suddenly called. James shoved his wand back in his pocket and hurried to the kitchen to retrieve the two-way mirror he and Sirius had used since their early days at Hogwarts. Lily scooped Harry up and raised his tiny hand, using it to wave to James as she

nodded upstairs to the nursery. He smiled and sent his son a kiss, then responded to Sirius.

"Good night, my sweetheart," Lily murmured as she nestled Harry in his soft blue blanket and tapped her wand to his mobile to start the quiet music that always lulled him right to sleep. "Mummy loves you. Sweet dreams." She kissed him once more, then shut off the lights with her wand and tiptoed out of the room, leaving the door ajar to allow a little light from the hallway.

"Lily," James greeted her tensely at the bottom of the staircase.

"Something wrong?" she asked in concern, noting how white his face had suddenly gone.

"Sirius thinks so. He went to check on Peter. He said he isn't there."

Lily's heart skipped a beat as she instinctively reached for her husband's hand. "Not there? He said he was going to stay."

James clenched his jaw and nodded, worry lines appearing on his forehead. "I don't know what to think. Sirius said there were no signs of a struggle."

"Perhaps he's just gone out, then," she said reasonably, trying not to jump to the worst conclusion.

"We told him not to," he ground out, his voice tense and the worry growing palpable in the air around them. "He shouldn't be going anywhere."

"But it's Peter," she countered. "He might have..."

"I think we ought to get Harry. Keep him with us, just in case."

"You don't really think Peter could have done anything. He wouldn't," she protested, her stomach beginning to churn violently at the idea of Harry in danger. They tried so hard to protect him, and she was just starting to feel safe under the magic of the Fidelius Charm. Peter had sworn to protect them, to keep them hidden away, and they were supposed to be hidden now where Voldemort could never find them.

"I hope not, Lily, but we can't take a chance. Not with Harry. Sirius is on his way here. We'll go to Hogwarts and have Dumbledore check the Charm, make sure it's still in place."

"James," she whimpered fearfully.

"It's all right, Lily," he promised, drawing her into a tight hug and kissing the top of her head. "I won't let anything happen to you. Either of you," he vowed. "Just go-"

The front door suddenly swung open, and Lily cried out as she spotted a black hood that did not belong to Sirius. The air suddenly felt colder, and she knew her worst nightmare had come true.

"Go," James whispered. "I love you."

There was no time to kiss him, no time for a last goodbye. No one faced Voldemort and won, and leaving him here was leaving him to certain death. But Harry was upstairs alone, completely defenseless and needing her. Her heart cried out in agony as she was released from her husband's embrace, but she did not hesitate even a second as she turned to bolt up the stairwell.

"How touching," a cold voice drawled. "It is too late to save your boy. Step aside, and I will not be forced to harm you."

Harry! Lily screamed inwardly. No, no, not Harry! Take me, not Harry! She scrambled up the stairs, desperate to reach her son, crying out to the stars to take her instead of Harry, to protect him, to stop Voldemort from reaching him. Just as she reached the top of the steps, she suddenly felt an incredible pain burst through her back. "Harry!" she screamed, throwing herself towards the nursery. "Harry!" she cried again, picturing her son in her mind and imagining herself in between him and Voldemort. I can save him, I can save him, she thought desperately. I'm sorry, Harry. Be safe, Love, be strong, she prayed to him. And then there was nothing.

James woke to an incredible burning in his throat. He choked on the thick air around him and tried to draw in a deep breath, but it stabbed at his lungs and his chest. He tried to force his eyes open, but they too began to burn. He could not recall why he was lying on the ground or why everything hurt, so he grew still and tried to focus, tried to remember how he came to be here.

Thoughts returned in painful waves. Sirius, calling him on the mirror. The pale, troubled look on his best friend's face. Peter missing. Lily worried, and...Lily! his mind suddenly screamed. Harry!

Pain no longer mattered as he remembered his last thoughts before blacking out. Voldemort was here, he was trying to attack them. James tried to stop him, but he wasn't quick enough. "Lily!" he cried, bolting upright and fighting through the smoke around him. He didn't have the presence of mind to cast a Bubblehead Charm, or any charm for that matter, as he ran to the last place he had seen her, praying frantically that she was still safe, that she was still alive. "Lily, please!" he cried in despair, thinking of Voldemort turning his wand on her while he was unconscious. How could he have let this happen? How could he have gone down before he knew Lily was safe? He vowed to protect her, and he was so easily defeated, so effortlessly ripped from her side.

"Lily!" he screamed once more. This time he was rewarded with sudden coughing and gagging, and he cleared away the smoke with his wand as he spotted red hair on the stairs. "Oh Lily, thank Merlin!"

"James!" she whimpered as he hurried up the stairs and dropped beside her on the landing. She was still choking on the smoke, and her green eyes were full of tears. "Harry! Where is he? Where's my baby?"

It was then, and only then, that James thought to look for the source of the smoke that was filling their house. He felt the cold finger of dread running down his spine as his fuzzy mind began to clear and the pieces started to fit together. He and Lily were alive, Voldemort was no longer here, and there was smoke. Harry...their baby...he was what Voldemort wanted, he was the target of the attack. And the only thing more cruel than killing their son was leaving them alive in a world without him.

"No," he breathed as the agony struck him. "No, no!"

Lily followed his gaze to the smoke pouring out of Harry's nursery. James could feel the heat now, and as he inched closer to the open doorway, he saw flames leaping through the room.

"No!" Lily screamed in anguish, jumping up from her place on the floor and attempting to run into the nursery.

Everything from there was a blur. He later recalled grabbing his wife, stopping her before she leapt into the flames herself. He wanted to dive in with her, but his last remaining shred of sanity protected them. He knew he couldn't let her go, no matter how badly they both wanted to follow Harry into death.

Later, he remembered a black cloak on the ground and what was left of the smoking, smoldering body of the wizard who terrorized them all. For a moment, he stared dazedly at the remains of Voldemort, shocked and confused and horrified all at once. Voldemort was dead, but there was no relief like there ought to be. There could be no joy now, no gratitude, nothing except grief. Because most of all, he remembered the flames licking his baby boy's nursery, the flames consuming all in sight. Harry's crib was already destroyed and crumbling, and Lily had screamed and wailed and beat against him as he tried desperately to hold her back.

Years and years later, he remembered the exact moment he realised, the exact moment he knew their son was lost. Lily was struggling in his arms, shrieking like a wounded animal, and he could only hold her back and stare in horror at the scene before him. Their son was supposed to be asleep in his crib, cuddled up warm and tight with his stuffed dog and dreaming beautiful dreams. But his room was ablaze, and the place their son had slept was now crumbling into ash.

For a moment, he was lost. The pain opened up like some great abyss and nearly swallowed him whole. He would have fallen into the flames and joined his baby boy if not for the woman he still held in his arms. It took every ounce of strength to do what he knew he must. Harry was gone, killed by Voldemort or killed by the fire now demolishing the room. There was nothing left alive in that room, and their son...their precious baby boy...he couldn't let Lily see that. He couldn't let her take another step and see the devastation inside, and he couldn't allow her to be hurt. He already failed his son, and she was all that was left to redeem him.

"I'm sorry," he choked. "I'm so sorry."

He tightened his grasp as she realised what he was about to do and fought him with all the strength of a tortured mother. He clenched his eyes shut and visualised the street in front of their house, then Apparated out, away from the flames, away from the death, away from Harry forever.

TBC

A/N: Thanks to everyone for the reads, reviews, and alerts so far! I know the prologue gave you nothing to go on, so I thank everyone who took interest so far! This chapter is the real beginning of the story, and I hope everyone enjoys! Please let me know what you think!

Chapter 1

Sirius Black felt a ripple of nervous energy run down his spine and wished desperately it was the full moon so he could run and play in the forest with his friends. Even after all these years, they still found the time, once a month, to accompany Moony during his transformations to an old cabin out in the woods. There was one less in their ranks now, but to Sirius, that made it all the more important to be there with Remus as he endured the terrible pain. Sirius had doubted him, and in doing so, he ruined everything. He had sworn, from that day forward, to forever trust his remaining friends and protect them no matter the cost. In all these years, they had missed only one moon on the night Lydia was born. Sirius had offered to accompany Remus even then, but his old friend had insisted he stay. After all, Moony reasoned, if he had to miss his goddaughter's birth, there ought to be one other Marauder present.

Sirius tried not to be hurt that he had not been chosen. James had taken him aside and assured him it had nothing to do with what happened to Harry, but they felt it only fair to make Remus godfather to their second child. Honestly, it was probably for the best. The guilt had haunted him for years, taunting him with the knowledge of his failure, and he wouldn't have been any good for Lydia. He would forever look at her beautiful green eyes and remember another child with those same eyes, a child he was meant to protect.

Sirius Black hated Halloween. He hated the annual reminder of his failure. He had sworn to keep James and Lily safe, to keep Harry safe. He thought that was precisely what he was doing when he switched places with Peter, ready and willing to sacrifice himself as bait in order to keep the location a secret, in order to keep Voldemort away from that little boy that he loved with all his heart. Being a father was never in the stars for him, but he had loved Harry almost like his own son. He spent nearly every free moment with the little family, playing with his godson when James and Lily were busy, helping out when one of them was out doing work for Dumbledore.

Even when they went into hiding, he came around as much as possible to entertain his godson and keep James and Lily company.

Every year, Halloween was a reminder of that sweet little boy they had lost because of his mistake, because he trusted the wrong person. He failed his godson, failed his best friends. He knew they didn't blame him; they had told him over and over, but it did no good to assuage the guilt he felt as keenly today as he did twelve years ago.

For the last twelve years, he had spent each Halloween with James and Lily, and later, Lydia. James and Lily knew he grieved for the boy, too, so each year, they would share a meal together and fondly remember that little life snuffed out so long before his time. The world knew him as the boy who rid them of Voldemort, and to this day, he was famous for what he had done. But only a select few knew Harry as he had been – a happy, giggling baby who loved when his dad made bubbles and shapes with his wand and loved to play with Padfoot. Only a few knew his infectious laugh, and every year, they gathered to remember him and visit the grave.

But tonight, Sirius was alone. The house at Godric's Hollow was empty now with Lydia at school, and James firecalled last night to tell him how Lily was struggling this year more than ever. They had decided to go to Hogsmeade, not wanting to take Lydia away from Hogwarts for her very first Halloween Feast but desperately needing her comfort. It was the first year Sirius was alone on the anniversary of his godson's death, so as he did every year, he took a little stuffed dog out to the grave and left it there with a few words to the boy he had loved. And now he found himself at home, wishing he had made the trip to Hogwarts himself. Remus was there teaching this year, so Sirius was the only one alone. Lydia was enjoying the wonder of her very first Halloween Feast, James and Lily were soothed by her presence, and Remus was there to see it all.

This is what you deserve, Padfoot, he reminded himself. If you had trusted Remus, Harry would still be here.

Knowing there would be no rest for him tonight, he thought of the muggle park down the street and decided to go for a bit of a run. No one would bother with a stray dog tonight, and he could burn off some of this excess energy so he could sleep and forget this whole rotten day.

Living at Grimmauld Place was a sort of punishment for him, a penance he felt he owed for getting Harry killed, but it came with some advantages. Since it was unplottable and hidden, he didn't need to worry about locking the doors behind him and left his wand safely on the sofa. He stepped out onto the front porch, transformed into Padfoot, and then ran into the dark night.

It was cold and raining tonight, the wind vicious and howling. It was appropriate, not only for Halloween, but also the morbid anniversary remembered tonight. The thick fur of his Animagus kept him from minding the cold or the rain, and it drove most of the Muggles indoors, giving him free roam of Caledonian Park tonight. He could hear laughter drifting on the wind from nearby celebrations as the world revelled on in cheerful oblivion. The Muggles surrounding him knew nothing of the little boy who died a hero twelve years ago tonight, knew nothing of the pain he and the Potter family felt tonight, and every night, since the boy was killed. The weather tonight was fit for mourning, not celebrating, and Sirius would wallow in the rain and misery until the dark anniversary was over.

As Padfoot, his feelings were somewhat dimmed. He loved his Animagus form,

loved the freedom and clarity of mind that came along with the dog's heightened senses. Nothing hurt so bad when he was Padfoot, and he could almost pretend he was out romping with his friends tonight as he splashed in a few puddles and felt mud pelt his coat. He would need a long hot shower when he returned home, but for now, he let himself be covered in mud and let the rain wash away the guilt and the ache of loss.

Eventually, the puddles lost their appeal. He chased after a few birds, but even as Padfoot, he couldn't completely forget his little godson. Harry had loved playing with his godfather in his Animagus form, even though he hadn't understood it. Under Lily's watchful gaze, Sirius would take the little boy out to the garden and transform, running in circles around his squealing, laughing godson and covering his face in wet kisses until Harry was laughing in delight. James had vowed to teach his son to become an Animagus when he was old enough (and registered, as Lily would insist) so they could share late night runs together, and when the boy was cleaned

up and tucked in bed at night, Sirius would gaze at him and wonder what form he might take, who he would be when he grew up.

But Harry never did grow up. Sirius never got to see his godson growing into his own person. Instead, he sat by and watched his best friends grieve. Those first two years were the worst, and Sirius had wondered then if any of them could make it through the loss. He wasn't even Harry's parent and he had felt miserable and depressed and empty without his boy. It was little Lydia who brought them around again, that lovely little miracle who gave them new purpose to live. And Sirius loved that little girl fiercely, but like James and Lily, he had never forgotten. She was Remus's godchild, not his, and so he spoiled her and loved her and attended every birthday and celebration, but he never let himself be as close to her as he had been to Harry. Lydia deserved better, and Remus was capable of giving it to her.

Feeling morose all over again, he glanced back in the direction of his house and considered returning home for a large glass of firewhiskey and an early bedtime. As he started to trot off towards the house, the wind shifted and his keen sense of smell suddenly detected a whiff of something he hadn't noticed before. He wasn't alone in the park tonight. There was someone here, someone human, and the scent seemed vaguely familiar. But it couldn't be, could it? He didn't spend much time as Padfoot except with James and Remus, so their scents were the only ones he knew well.

Curiosity piqued, he followed the scent until his eyes finally detected a figure on a bench. It was too dark to really make out much, but he could discern a figure lying on a park bench, face turned inwards in a vain effort to shield it from the rain. What could anyone be doing out in this weather? he wondered as he moved a little closer. As he approached the figure, he realised it was too small to be an adult, and his heart skipped a few beats. It was a boy, he could tell, but what was a child doing out here in this weather? The whole park was deserted, and it was growing a bit late for a young boy to be out on his own.

His dog form was rather large and intimidating, so Padfoot moved quietly towards the boy and tried not to startle him. Closer now, he could see the boy was in no shape to be out in this weather, dressed in tattered jeans and a t-shirt, his thin arms exposed to the elements.

His dark hair was matted down with rain, and he was shaking so hard it was a miracle he could even remain on the bench.

Too worried now to care about startling the boy, he hurried over and nudged at the arms with his nose. The figure jerked and jumped a bit, but he did not roll over to see who was here. His shivers suddenly ceased, his body curling in on itself as he tried to conserve heat.

He's going to freeze to death! Sirius felt himself beginning to panic. It was already unseasonably cold tonight, and the wind and the rain couldn't be helping. Realising the boy was in a bad way and needed urgent help, Sirius made a quick decision and transformed back into himself. "Hey, kid," he said quietly, hoping not to startle the boy too much. He reached over and touched the boy's skin, finding it icy cold and his clothes completely soaked through. "Merlin," he muttered under his breath, not sure what to do next. Before he could decide, the boy began to shiver again, violent shudders that seemed to rack his whole body. "Kid," he murmured a bit louder and gave the boy a gentle shake.

"Mmm," the boy mumbled, shivers halting once more. His muscles clenched up, his limbs growing stiff with the cold.

With as much care as possible, Sirius slid a hand under the boy and flipped him onto his other side. He winced as he felt clearly defined ribs beneath the t-shirt. It wasn't hard to guess now why this kid was out here tonight...he had nowhere else to go. Hazarding a glance towards his face, he realised the boy was no more than eleven or twelve. Only a boy, just a child, and he was abandoned and alone on this cold, miserable night.

Well, not anymore, he thought determinedly. "Hello there," he said softly, stroking back the damp locks of hair from the child's face. A pair of old glasses were perched on his nose, clearly broken in the middle and wrapped several times in tape to hold them together. He swallowed down a lump of emotion, forcing himself not to wonder why this had happened and instead focus on getting him warm. Shaking off his own cloak, he wrapped it around the child still huddled in a tight little ball. His arms and legs were completely locked up, and he mumbled something Sirius couldn't make out.

"It's all right, Kid," he promised. "I'll get you warmed up." He gathered the bundle into his arms, knowing the cloak did little good as wet as he was. The boy barely weighed a thing, but he groaned as Sirius lifted him and pulled him in close to his chest to shield him as much as possible from the blustering wind and pelting rain.

"Don't wanna," the boy mumbled and tried to rip the cloak off of himself even as shivers began anew. "Don't make...not a freak...leave me 'lone."

"Shh," Sirius tried to hush him, awkwardly tugging the cloak back over him while trying not to drop him. The boy tried again, and Sirius cursed his stupidity for leaving his wand at home. He shifted the bundle, bringing the cloak where he could clasp the edges and keep the boy from pulling it off of himself while still keeping a tight grasp on him. "There," he soothed. "You'll be all right."

"Nooo," the boy moaned and thrashed. "Go 'way."

"Shh," he quieted once more. But the boy continued to mumble, his words slurred and nonsensical. Sirius could have sworn he said something about an owl, but nothing he said was coherent, so he just continued to try to hush the boy and keep him calm. Perhaps the kid needed a muggle hospital, but Sirius had no idea where the nearest was, nor was he keen on the idea of carrying the boy longer than necessary in this weather. Apparition would only frighten him, not to mention the affects it might have in his current condition. Home was the best – and fastest – option.

The boy went abruptly and worryingly still as soon as Sirius crossed over the threshold of Number 12. "Stay with me, Kid," he encouraged as he placed him gently on the sofa and grabbed his wand, casting a quick drying spell on the boy's clothes, hair, and skin. He summoned a heavy blanket from the hallway closet and cast his most powerful warming charm over it, then wrapped it securely around the stiff child. Even here on the warm, comfortable sofa, the boy remained in a tight ball, and in the light, Sirius could tell he was deathly pale and taking on a bluish tinge at his lips. "No, no," he whispered as the panic returned. The boy was critically ill, and Sirius was completely out of his element.

Remus was the one who knew all the healing spells, Lily was the one who could nurture, and James was the one who could keep

them all calm as they dealt with a crisis. Sirius was never good in these situations. He kept his head in danger and could fire off curses and hexes faster than his friends, but he was rubbish with the aftermath. Why was he the only one around when this boy was freezing to death on a park bench?

"Kreacher!" he shouted, summoning his barmy house-elf from wherever he was hiding...probably in his mother's old closet. He hated to bring the loathsome things into this, but crazy and demented as he was, he was obedient.

"Master calls," the elf answered bitterly as he popped into the room, giant eyes growing wide as he took in the boy on the sofa.

"Watch this boy," Sirius ordered. "He was in the park, half-frozen and sopping wet. Don't frighten him," he added as an afterthought, "but call for me if he says anything or tries to get up."

"Whatever Master says," Kreacher agreed. "What would Master like me to do with him?"

"Just watch him, Kreacher," he ordered, narrowing his eyes as he wondered what Kreacher would like to do to him. Walburga Black had personally groomed the elf to hate muggles, and left to his own devices, there was no telling what the miserable little thing would do to this poor child. "Make sure he stays under that blanket, but don't hurt him. He doesn't know what he's doing."

"Yes, Master," Kreacher responded.

Eyeing them warily, Sirius reluctantly left the boy with his house-elf and hurried to the library to hunt for the proper books, hoping they were still here. Long ago, the Black library contained plenty of references for all sorts of spells, but he hadn't wandered in there in years now. Remus had once declared the place a mausoleum of the dark, full of books the Ministry would probably banish and destroy if they ever got their hands on them. Sirius would have destroyed them all long ago if he cared enough to set foot in the room, but now he just hoped there were a few helpful books littered through the materials on muggle hunting and torturing your enemies.

"Accio healing books," he tried on a whim, overwhelmingly relieved when a few volumes flew off the shelves and landed in front of him.

He quickly flipped through the pages, locating a few potions that would help and reading a few brief passages on what to do for hypothermia. As soon as he digested the words, his stomach churned with fear and anxiety. The kid was desperately ill, and as small and thin as he was, his body couldn't take much. The shivers that started and stopped were a bad sign, indicative of his body running out of energy it needed to generate heat. He was mumbling and incoherent, his brain growing sluggish as his body shut down. Not tonight, he thought miserably, cursing fate for forcing a dying boy into his lap the same night his godson was killed twelve years earlier. This child could nearly be his godson...was this life's way of repaying him for his terrible sin? No, he refused, rushing back to the boy, determined to keep him alive. Twelve years ago, Harry was killed by Voldemort because of Sirius's mistake. This child didn't have to die, not if he did things right. In memory of Harry, he would keep this boy from fading away.

But magic wouldn't help him much. Not with this. Magic could easily heat the boy back to a normal temperature, but it would also overwhelm him. The books warned against rapid methods of warming him with magic, methods that seemed tempting but would kill him instead of save him. Too much too quickly, and the frozen heart would stop. He was in for a long night of carefully monitoring the boy, slowly raising his temperature, and hoping there was enough left to save so another innocent child didn't have to die like Harry did.

"Filthy muggle boy doesn't want his blanket," Kreacher muttered as he kept trying to cover up the child again.

"Don't call him that!" Sirius ordered heatedly. "Go fix him something to drink. Sugar water," he said, remembering what he read in the book. "Hot water with sugar, Kreacher. And fetch the Pepper-Up."

"Whatever Master says," the house-elf bowed even as he sneered at him.

Pushing his irritation aside, Sirius crouched down next to the boy and summoned a few towels to pack around him. He cast warming charms over them as well, gently coaxing the boy's arms away from his sides so he could cover him up. It was difficult, as tightly as his muscles were clenched, but he managed to encase the boy in the

warm towels before wrapping him up in the blanket once more. "There you go," he murmured.

In his confusion, the boy tried to rid himself of the blanket again, and Sirius had to stop him as gently as possible.

"Keep that on," he chided. "You're half-frozen." Pulling out his wand again, he checked the boy's temperature and felt his stomach churn with worry. He'd never seen a person so cold before, and he'd played many a Quidditch match outdoors in the snow. It wasn't even freezing outside, but the boy was tiny to begin with, and he was dressed for a pleasant spring day instead of a rainy autumn night.

"Don't," the boy muttered. "I'll stop. I won't."

Sirius found the child's hand beneath all the blankets and squeezed. He didn't know what nightmares the boy had lived, and he reckoned he didn't want to. "You're all right now," he promised. "It's safe and warm. Rest now."

Kreacher returned with the teapot, but the boy probably wasn't well enough to drink yet. Sirius remained by his side, holding his hand, regularly casting a charm to check his temperature and make sure it was slowly rising. He wasn't shivering yet and still felt like a block of ice, but his muscles were beginning to relax. The most worrisome part was his breathing, which felt agonisingly slow to the man watching each shallow gasp. A quick check of the pulse at his neck revealed it was also decidedly slower than it ought to be, and Sirius cast a longing look towards the fire and wished he could call for someone.

"You need to be strong," he told the boy, at a loss for anything else that might help him right now. "I lost my godson twelve years tonight. He was only fifteen months old and should have had a long, happy life ahead of him, just like you. So be strong, Kid. Wouldn't be fair for you to go tonight."

He recast the warming charms over the towels and blankets and waited a little longer, watching for signs of life. Finally, the boy's dark lashes began to flutter against nearly translucent cheeks. He mumbled something and tossed his head to the side in discomfort and agitation, so Sirius reached for the teapot and warmed it up again with his wand.

"Can you wake up?" he asked quietly, tapping the boy's cheeks a few times. "I have something for you. Just sit up," he urged. The boy's eyelids fluttered again, and Sirius moved to his side and worked on sitting him upright against the cushions. It was no easy task, as confused and lethargic as he was, but he finally managed it once he slid beneath the boy's arm to keep him propped up. "All right now, time to drink," he insisted, holding the cup up to the boy's lips. He seemed confused at first and tried to pull away, but Sirius kept tapping the rim of the cup to his mouth and tipped it back as far as he dared until the boy finally opened his mouth and swallowed some of the stuff. "That's it. Good boy," he encouraged. He sat with him and slowly doled out the hot liquid a sip at a time until it was finished, then handed the cup to Kreacher for more.

"Where...?" the boy whispered, pushing a little against Sirius.

"Hush. It's all right. You're safe," he promised. "My name is Sirius. You're at my house," he explained slowly.

"S-sirius," the boy murmured.

"That's right," he nodded. Kreacher handed him the cup again, and Sirius moved to sit in front of the boy to offer it to him again. Dark lashes fluttered once more, and suddenly, Sirius was meeting a pair of brilliant emerald eyes.

He was so startled by the intensity and familiarity of those eyes that he jumped back and gasped, scaring the boy and causing hot liquid to slosh on him. The kid didn't even react, staring blankly ahead, mind still slow from the cold.

"Oh Merlin," Sirius breathed, suddenly certain that he was cracking up. This was all a hallucination; there was no boy at all. His guilt was torturing him with this Harry look alike on the anniversary of his godson's death, projecting an image of what could have been, except their Harry should have been safe and protected and healthy at Hogwarts, not ragged and shivering at Grimmauld Place. He waved his hands in front of his face and rubbed at his eyes to make the spectre disappear, but when he opened his eyes again, the same vision was still before him.

This boy looked just like James. It was more than passing resemblance, now that he really looked at the boy. The features that had seemed familiar now appeared eerily identical. He was the spitting image of James except for a pair of Lily's bright green eyes. And he knew those eyes so well. He had seen those eyes every day since he was eleven years old, usually filled with contempt for something he had done, then later, affection. Harry had looked at him with those same eyes, always filled with laughter, and now, little Lydia was the one to look at him with brilliant emerald eyes glinting with mischief and excitement.

If he didn't know better, Sirius would swear he was staring at Harry. Who else could look so much like James and gaze at him with Lily's eyes? This boy had the same messy jet-black hair as his best mate, the same nose, the same high cheekbones. He had the fine facial structures of a pure-blood, but instead of James's hazel eyes, the kid's eyes were Evans green. But that was impossible; Harry died twelve years ago today. Harry never grew out of his chubby baby cheeks, and the last time Sirius laid eyes on him, his hair was still that fine, soft baby fluff. Harry never had the chance to grow into the little reflection of his father, but how was it that this boy looked so remarkably similar to both James and Lily? He was even close to the right age, perhaps a little younger, but as thin as he was, it wasn't hard to guess he hadn't been well cared for in a long time. He could be as old as thirteen...the same as Harry would be if he was still alive.

"You can't be," he shook his head. "He's dead. He's dead." He clenched his eyes shut for a moment, remembering the flames once more.

The Harry look alike shivered convulsively and brought Sirius back to the matter at hand. Harry is dead, but this boy is alive and very sick, he reminded himself. He reached for the cup again and held it up to the child's lips, his hands shaking as he doled out the hot, sweet liquid to a boy who could be Harry's twin.

But it isn't Harry, he reminded himself. It was probably just grief playing tricks with his mind, making him resemble James and Lily far more than he really ought to. He was a boy, just a boy, and Harry died in a fire twelve years ago after defeating the most dangerous wizard the world had ever known. Harry was gone, forever, and no matter how much this boy resembled him, the real Harry died twelve

years ago in Godric's Hollow. He died saving the world, and perhaps this was no coincidence, perhaps this child needed someone tonight and Sirius was the best man for the job. Perhaps his own grief made him the suitable Healer for the boy tonight, and tomorrow, he would not look quite so much like James. Tomorrow, he would just be a lost boy with a messy mop of black hair that was a bit reminiscent of James.

The boy finished his cup of warmed sugar water, and Sirius refilled it one final time. This time the child began to sputter, not wanting anymore, so Sirius set the cup aside and tenderly helped the kid lay back down. The green eyes fluttered closed, and Sirius was relieved not to see them anymore. It was too distracting, too unnerving. He covered him once more with the blanket, tucking it securely around him to make sure he was as warm as he could be. It doesn't matter who he looks like, he told himself. The point was, he reminded Sirius of Harry, and the instinct to protect him, to care for him, was nearly overwhelming.

"Shh, you'll be all right," he soothed, smoothing the blanket over him and casting another warming charm. Once more the boy tried to rid himself of the blanket, so Sirius added a sticking charm that kept it wrapped securely around him. After a few moments of struggle, the boy conceded defeat and relaxed. "Try to sleep now, Kid. You'll feel better when you wake," he promised.

Whether the boy heard and understood, Sirius could not be certain. But he did relax against the sofa cushions and seemed to fall asleep, his breaths evening out and not nearly as laboured as they had been earlier. Confident that he would stay put for a while, Sirius stood and began to pace, trying to work out the nervous energy and the racing thoughts.

Harry is dead, he reminded himself once more, determined to convince his own mind before imagination ran away with him. You saw it happen. You saw the house burn to the ground.

Even now, the memory hurt. Even now, he felt the searing heat from the flames along with the wretched knowledge that the little boy was still inside. It was no consolation that he was likely dead long before the fire caused him any pain, not when they had to stand and watch, not when there was only a tiny empty coffin to bury in the graveyard. And it had been no consolation to see his friends alive, not when

James was holding his screaming wife back, desperately clinging to her to keep her from running back inside to perish in the flames herself in a futile attempt to rescue the infant. For a crazy moment, he had wanted to run in himself, just in case there was still a chance, just in case Harry was somehow protected from the all-consuming fire.

But they all knew better. The house was beginning to collapse, and nothing remained inside. None of them could rescue Harry, no matter how much they wanted to. And that was why the boy on the sofa could not be Harry, no matter how much he resembled James. It could be a coincidence, after all. Dark, messy hair was hardly uncommon, and though the eyes were distinctly Lily, she inherited them from somewhere. The Evans family went back centuries; the boy could be anyone, a distant relative or even a stranger who just stumbled upon bright green eyes in his own family tree.

But it's Halloween, a nagging voice in the back of his mind repeated. Twelve years to the day that Harry died. Perhaps it was a message from beyond, the universe attempting to right past wrongs by sending to Sirius another boy who needed saving in exchange for the one he had been helpless to spare. But magic was a strange and wonderful thing, and Sirius learned long ago that he could not question fate or the mysteries that controlled all their lives. Magic had a way of working things out the way they ought to be, and suddenly Sirius had stumbled upon an abandoned boy who looked just like James, who was right around the age their Harry should be, and it was the anniversary of the day he died. Could Harry have been sent back? What if Voldemort had done some strange magic? They could never know what truly happened between Harry and Voldemort that night, so who was to say that boy wasn't Harry? With magic, nothing was truly impossible.

Returning to the boy, Sirius crouched down beside him and lay a hand on his cold cheek. A wave of sympathy surged through him as he pitied this poor child. No matter who he was, he deserved better than this. When he woke, Sirius vowed to give it to him.

"You're very much like James," he told the boy, hoping that the sound of someone talking was comforting to him. Sirius remembered how he used to find it soothing, all those years ago at Hogwarts, when his best friends would keep him company after nasty letters from his parents or a return from a bad holiday. Perhaps the

boy would find it comforting as well. "He's my best mate," he continued. "More than that, really. My brother. I ran away from home when I was sixteen. This home, actually, only it was worse back then. It was James who took me in, along with his parents. Always made me feel welcome. He's the very best sort of man; he always stood by his friends. Harry would have been very lucky to have him as a father." And you look precisely as our Harry would if he had lived, he added inwardly. But he couldn't have, could he? How could we have been mistaken?

It was impossible. It had to be. How could they have thought Harry dead if he wasn't? How could Harry have been anywhere except in the crib that was destroyed by fire when Voldemort died? If, by some miracle, Harry had survived and this was really him, where had he been for twelve years? How could he be starving and freezing while his family mourned him?

Sighing wearily, Sirius moved his hand to stroke the boy's hair once more. As he did, he cleared a few locks of hair from his forehead and noticed something he hadn't seen before. The skin was red there, as though he'd been injured. Frowning, he moved the hair aside again and gasped aloud.

A scar. And not just any scar. The boy had a scar in the perfect shape of a lightning bolt etched into the smooth skin over his left brow. Anything else could be coincidence, but this mark could only mean one thing. This mark could only be placed on the boy's skin from a curse, and a very powerful, dark one at that. The boy was no muggle at all, and he had endured a terrible curse and lived.

The Killing Curse, Sirius realised with an icy rush of dread. It was the only curse powerful enough to leave this sort of scar. And no one had ever survived it before, just as no one had been able to defeat Voldemort. But this boy had survived Avada Kedavra. He was the only one who ever had. This boy in front of him was the one who killed Voldemort, and that could mean only one thing: the boy in front of him was Harry James Potter.

A/N: Thank you SO MUCH for the wonderful responses, the favorites, and the alerts. You guys are awesome! I'm so excited that people are enjoying the story so far, and I hope you continue to do so! Please let me know what you think of this new chapter! This one is heavy on the angst and the background, so please let me know your thoughts! Hope everyone is having a wonderful holiday season!

Chapter 2

Sirius stared in stunned horror and utter helplessness for quite some time. The scar on the boy's forehead was mysterious and awful and yet wondrous and miraculous, all at the same time. That scar spoke of a night Sirius desperately wanted to forget, a night he had lived in his nightmares for twelve years. That scar spoke of James and Lily's desperation, his own grief and guilt, and of a child who was marked for death from the moment a prophecy was spoken. But that scar, by all rights, shouldn't exist. A scar meant survival and healing, and the only boy who could bear such a scar was a boy who was meant to have perished long ago in a fire brought about by fierce, unknowable magic.

"We can never know what transpired between Harry and Voldemort that night," Dumbledore had told them. "Harry's magic was powerful but uncontrollable. Whatever the boy did, he cast the curse back at Voldemort. I can only speculate that the interaction of the magic caused a sort of explosion."

Magical explosion. That was the cause of Harry's death. Dumbledore did not believe the Killing Curse had done it, or the rebound would not have been powerful enough to stop Voldemort. Harry did not absorb the curse, not fully, but his own resulting magic, the magic that stopped the Dark Lord, had caused the terrible flames. That scar was a symbol of the place where he was struck with the curse, confirming Dumbledore's theory that it was the fire that killed him, not Voldemort's spell. In essence, Harry's own magic had killed him. At least, they thought it did. They believed it for twelve years, buried an empty coffin in a grave in Godric's Hollow, sat beside that grave and mourned the lost little boy, brought little plush animals and cried into the earth.

Sirius needed help. He needed someone to confirm this, to tell him he hadn't gone mad with the grief and guilt of it all. But he couldn't bring James, couldn't torture him like this. He had no answers, no

hows or whys or whens, and he still couldn't even be convinced this was real. Maybe his tenuous hold on sanity had finally broken, maybe twelve years of agony had finally addled his brain. If he went to James and Lily and told them their son was alive, only for them to find it was a figment of his own imagination...that would tear them apart for no reason at all.

Moony, he thought immediately, but the werewolf was at Hogwarts with James and Lily and Lydia. Moony was the only one who could calm him down and provide some rational explanation for the ghost of a boy currently asleep on his sofa, but for once, his friend wouldn't be in his office reading a book. But if he was with James...

Leaping up, Sirius grabbed his two-way mirror and called for James before he gave himself a moment to second guess.

"Padfoot?" his friend asked in surprise.

"Lo, Prongs," he greeted. "Sorry to bother, but is Moony there?"

"Yes, of course, but we're just taking Lydia back to the tower."

"I'm afraid it's urgent. Could you ask him to go to his office? I'll Floo him there."

"Can't you just use the mirror?" James asked in confusion.

"No, it's...no, I need his help on something."

James disappeared from the mirror for a moment, then popped back in. "Moony doesn't even want to know what sort of trouble you've gotten yourself into. He says he'll-"

"James, tell him I need him."

James instantly grew somber at his friend's serious tone. "Listen, Padfoot," he said, his voice dropping an octave. "Why don't you pop on up here. Lyddie would love to see you. So would we," he said meaningfully. Any other time, Sirius might have been touched, but James's concern was misplaced tonight.

"James, I swear I'm all right. I just need to speak with Remus."

James pondered for a moment before conceding. "All right, Mate. He's on his way. Want me to stay on?"

"No, you get back to your girls," he encouraged. "Give Lulu a hug for me."

"I will," James promised. "Call if you need me, yeah?"

"Course, mate."

"Oh, wait, Lily wants to say something," James announced, and the mirror went blank again for an instant before Lily's face popped into the frame.

"All right, Sirius?" she asked, her voice dripping with warmth and concern. It made him want to scream with frustration that she could be so gentle and understanding when she was the one who had lost a child. He had no right to be mourning the way she was, but that was Lily. She was always worried about everyone else, and he would always love her for it.

"I'm fine, Lils," he promised tightly. "You?"

"Missing him," she smiled sadly, and he could see the tears in her eyes. "Twelve years, and I still miss him so much."

"We all do, Lily."

"James meant it, you know. Come on over here if you need us."

"I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise," he repeated. "Bye, Lils. Love you."

"You too, Padfoot."

He was just putting the mirror away when a familiar face popped into the fire. "Sirius?" Remus called him.

He crouched down in front of the fireplace, tossing a nervous glance behind him to make sure Harry – no, the boy – was still sleeping

soundly. He'd be in for quite a shock if woke to find them conversing through the fire. "Remus, thank you," he said quickly.

"Of course. I was afraid something might happen when you didn't come tonight. You know you shouldn't be alone tonight, Padfoot," Remus chided, ever the voice of reason.

Funny enough, I'm not alone, he thought wryly. "It's nothing like that. At least, I don't think so, but I do need your help."

"What are you talking about? What's happened, Sirius?"

"I think...I'm afraid I've gone 'round the bend, Moony," he admitted.

"What do you mean?" Remus frowned.

"Something happened tonight. Something impossible. I know it's impossible but I...I don't know what to think. Can you come through?" he asked hopefully.

"Sirius, tell me what's going on," his friend demanded.

"I don't think I can explain. I just need to come and tell me that I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing."

"Have you done something? Do I need to find a Healer to-"

"For God's sake, Moony, I haven't done anything crazy!" he cried in exasperation. Perhaps he ought to be concerned that all his friends believed him capable of offing himself tonight, but he would have to deal with that another day. "Will you please stop guessing and just come through?"

"This better be worth it, Sirius," his friend grumbled.

"Oh, it will be," Sirius muttered under his breath as he stood up to make room for Remus. His friend appeared a few moments later, looking none too pleased and covered in soot.

"All right then, what is it?" he asked expectantly.

"Over there," he gestured, indicating the sleeping boy on the sofa.

Remus's eyes instantly grew wide. "Merlin, Sirius, what in the world? Where did you-"

"I went for a run earlier," he cut him off. With Remus, it was always best to stop the lecture and the ranting before it really began, else it could go on for hours. "As Padfoot, and you can yell at me for that later, yeah? I found him out there in the park, shaking and shivering and nearly frozen to death. Couldn't very well leave him, could I?"

"So you brought a muggle boy to your house? Of all the reckless, irresponsible things! And tonight, Sirius? You know James and Lily are beside themselves! Now they're going to be worried about you as well, and what do you-"

"He was ill, Moony!" he defended himself. "Completely frozen and sopping wet. He wouldn't have made it much longer, and what do I know about muggle hospitals? I wanted to get him warm."

"All right," Remus sighed wearily. "I'll take him to the hospital and come up with some explanation, but we'll have to go to the Ministry and explain this, Sirius. You're an Auror, you ought to know better. You should have called them straight away. If you've done magic in front of him, there will be an inquiry."

"I know the urge to lecture is killing you, Professor, but perhaps you should take a good look at him before you launch into a tirade on the Statute of Secrecy."

"Why would I do that?"

"Remus, look at him," he demanded again.

His friend finally relented, and as he stepped over to the sofa, he nearly tripped on his own two feet and gasped aloud. "Good lord," he breathed, his face paling. "He looks

like..."

"James," he nodded.

"The spitting image."

"See why I thought I might have cracked up?"

"This is impossible," Remus shook his head and stepped over a little closer, kneeling down on the ground to inspect the boy. "Merlin."

"He was awake a while ago. Want to take a guess at what colour his eyes are?"

Remus was silent for a distressingly long period as he stared at the boy. "Sirius," he finally began cautiously. "I know what it looks like, but you can't..."

"Look at his forehead."

Remus raised a shaking hand and brushed back the hair, just as Sirius had done not so long ago. "Oh dear God," he murmured. "Sirius, that's a curse scar."

"From a very dark and powerful curse."

"But this can't be," Remus shook his head. "It's impossible."

"No one ever knew how he did it, how he killed Voldemort. Not even Dumbledore could truly explain. But he was right about one thing...the curse didn't kill Harry. It rebounded back to Voldemort."

"But the fire, Sirius," Remus protested. "Whatever happened, that room was entirely consumed. Lily and James couldn't even get inside."

"Lily said the crib was in flames," Sirius agreed as he once more remembered that terrible night. He had stood outside the house in Godric's Hollow listening to Lily's torturous wails and trying to restrain James, trying to keep him from running back into the fire to search for his baby boy, a boy who could not have survived the devastation inside. James had kicked and screamed and cried before collapsing on the ground and retching in the grass, and Lily had just shrieked in ungodly pain. There was nothing anyone could do as they watched the house burn, and Sirius had wanted to perish himself as he thought of his beloved godson sacrificed to the fire.

But what if he wasn't there? What if he was already gone? They hadn't combed through the ashes, knowing it would do more harm than good, and they buried a tiny, empty coffin where he ought to

have been. In the Godric's Hollow Cemetery, there was a tiny little marker with his name etched into the stone along with a simple verse. "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord."

But what if Harry was alive all along? There was no body in that grave, and Lily had not gotten to the nursery in time to see anything except the twisted black robes of Voldemort and flames consuming her child's room. Of course they had believed Harry was there, right where he should have been, but what if he wasn't?

"He did his first accidental magic that week," he rasped. "Do you remember? Summoned his cup from clear across the room. James was so proud. Going on and on about how babies never showed their magical talents that young so it was clear Harry was going to be a genius."

"What are you suggesting?" Remus asked quietly. "You don't truly believe he could have..."

"He was attacked, Moony, and suddenly there was fire. In extreme circumstances, it's possible."

"I've never heard of accidental Apparition. We don't teach it to children because of the sheer level of determination and focus required."

"Have you ever heard of a baby defeating a full grown, powerful wizard? How he managed to Apparate, if that is what happened, is hardly the most mysterious thing that happened that night."

"I suppose you're right," Remus conceded. "But we can't breathe a word of this to James and Lily until we know. I can't imagine how they might react. I'm not even certain how I feel myself. It seems impossible that we could have been mistaken, that any of us would have accepted him as dead unless there was incontrovertible truth."

"We believed there was," Sirius shrugged. "There was nothing living in that house, and Voldemort was dead inside. There was no reason to suspect Harry wasn't in there as well."

Remus laid a gentle hand on the boy's cheek. "He's still quite cold, Sirius."

"Much better than he was. I gave him hot water with sugar, and he's wrapped in warm towels."

"You said he was in the park? What could he have been doing out on a night like tonight?"

"He was sleeping on a bench, Moony. In torn jeans and a t-shirt, in this weather. I could feel his bones. He has nowhere to go."

"We can't tell James and Lily."

"I know."

"There may be another explanation."

"I know that, too."

"He probably needs a Healer, Sirius. You've done well with him, but he looks dreadful."

"I'll send Kreacher for supplies. I have Pepper-Up, but Kreacher can get the other potions."

"I'm not certain he wouldn't be better off in a muggle hospital," Remus said cautiously. "He doesn't know anything of magic. He'll be terrified when he wakes."

"If we take him to a hospital, who knows what the muggles will do with him? They might take him away, Moony, and we can't let them do that until we know for certain," he argued.

"All right," Remus conceded. "But if he isn't better in the morning, at least let Poppy come and see him. I'll research what we can do to find out who he is. I need to return to Hogwarts before James and Lily get worried and come to check on us."

Sirius nodded, not wanting to be left alone but knowing it would be far worse if their friends came to look in on them. And Sirius had no doubt they would do just that. If Remus didn't return soon, James and Lily would be certain there was some terrible problem. Remus had to go back and lie, convince them it was nothing.

"Will you be all right?" Remus asked worriedly.

"Yes," he nodded with more confidence than he felt. "They need you there, Moony."

Remus nodded, then stepped forward to embrace his friend. "I'll be back in the morning," he promised. "Take care of him."

"I will," he vowed. He watched his friend step back into the fireplace and floo back to the castle. No mistakes this time, he told himself as he returned to the boy's side. No mistakes.

"You can go check on him, you know," Lily told her husband from the bed as James changed out of his robes.

James turned around and faced her, abandoning his task as he gazed at the amazing woman he married. He still remembered the first time he laid eyes on her all those years ago, her bright red hair calling to him as though she was some sort of siren. He hadn't known then how he would fall for her, how a few years later, she would be his first thought every morning and his last thought every night. She had grown impossibly more lovely since their first days at Hogwarts, and the love shining in her green eyes made her all the more beautiful. Back then there had mostly been contempt, and the occasional guilty amusement, but now...now there was love, respect, adoration. Those amazing eyes were sad tonight, filled with memories of their baby boy, but his grief always made him so much more aware of her, how fortunate he was to have her. The devastation could have torn them apart, as young as they were when they lost Harry, but instead, they emerged from his death stronger than before, the tragedy drawing them closer to one another, forcing them to rely on each other as they never had before.

"No," he shook his head and walked over to her side. "I'm right where I want to be tonight."

"I'm all right," she assured him quietly. "Better, anyway. Seeing Lydia helped."

"I don't care," he responded honestly and leaned over to kiss her, resting his forehead against hers. "I want to be with you tonight."

"But you're worried," she deduced easily, always able to read him so effortlessly.

He shrugged and kissed her again. Of course he was worried. Sirius was his best mate, his brother. Harry's death had affected Sirius nearly as much as James and Lily, both because he loved the boy and because he felt responsible. It was nonsense, and James had been trying to convince him for twelve years. They all went along with the plan, they all agreed. They all suspected Remus...Remus, for God's sake! It spoke to the chaos and confusion of the time, and they all made a mistake.

For a year, James did blame himself. But he'd never been able to fault Sirius, not ever, because Sirius had been so willing to die for them. He may have been the one to suggest switching to Peter, but it only spoke more to his loyalty, to his willingness to sacrifice himself if necessary to protect them. He knew he would be targeted. He knew everyone would believe he was the Secret Keeper, and he was willing to die but never willing to take even a chance at betraying them. He could be tortured and killed, and as long as the Potters stayed safe, he would be happy. And so James could not ever blame him for the mistake, but he could hate himself for letting Harry down.

For a miserable year, he replayed that night over and over and over again in his mind. He never should have hesitated in getting Lily and Harry and escaping. He never should have let Harry out of his sight. He should have been faster up those stairs, should have fought through the flames for his son. He was fully prepared to go to his grave believing himself responsible for their terrible loss and hating himself for his failure. A father should die before his son, after all. A father should die for his son. Not the other way around.

Then, miraculously, Lily came to him one night and wove their fingers together, placing their joined hands on her flat stomach. She didn't speak a word, but she didn't have to. He knew.

His first reaction was to weep. He didn't know if it was joy or agony, but he wept with his wife in the bed they shared and thought of his baby boy. There would be a new baby now, a new little life to adore and fuss over. He would be a daddy once more. The hole left by Harry would always be there, but it would slowly begin to fill, just a little, when that missing part of him was restored. Lily had told him

about the emptiness when she saw babies out in public and remembered when she had that, too. She told him of the instinct to turn to her child every time she heard a baby's cries. And he knew the feeling well. It was odd returning home without a baby toddling toward him, odd not being 'dada' after hearing that precious word for months. And now he would again, now he would be husband and father once more.

But their baby would never know Harry. To all the world, they would be first-time parents. His second child would grow up not ever knowing the first to fill the Potters' hearts. Somewhere deep down, James didn't want his emptiness filled; it felt like a betrayal. How could he move on and be happy when Harry never would? It was tempting to stay inside and grieve forever, but a baby...a brand new baby...he would be needed again, and he could not choose to dwell in his misery forever.

That night, he and Lily walked hand in hand to their son's tiny grave. He wept all over again as he stared at the stone that never should have had reason to exist. "I miss you so much," he had whispered into the dark night. "I'll always love you, little man."

Lily whispered her own words of love for the boy, and then they walked back to the house determined to live again. They spent a year grieving their son, and they would never, ever forget him, but it was time to go on. They had rebuilt a house in Godric's Hollow so they would never be far from his last resting spot, but it was enough now. They paid so dearly for their mistakes, and they could not continue punishing themselves if they wanted to give their new baby a chance at a normal, happy life.

Lydia Lucille Potter was born three weeks early on a bright spring day, too impatient to wait another moment to join the world. It was a trait she carried with her to this day, and he couldn't love her more for it. In Lydia, called Lulu by those closest to her, James found his salvation. Lily had been his rock and his comfort, and Lydia was his reason to find joy and delight in the world once more.

Lydia was beautiful from the start, a lovely little girl with an endless supply of energy and curiosity and wonder. She looked more like Lily than himself, but she was a more precise blend of her parents than Harry had been. Harry was all daddy with just a few subtle hints of mum, while Lydia was a careful mixture of the two. She had his

dark hair with Lily's green eyes, and her small facial features were all Evans, along with high Potter cheekbones. She was slow to anger, unlike either of her parents, with a sweetness from Lily and a mischievous streak a mile wide like her father. Unfortunately, she seemed to have inherited his talent for trouble, and they'd received more than their fair share of owls since she started Hogwarts in September.

But James never cared about that. Lydia was a good girl with a marvelous little laugh, clear as a tiny bell, and she adored her daddy as much as Harry had. He got to be there for every day of Lydia's life, and there was no prophecy hanging over their heads, no dark fate for his baby girl. They raised her to know about her big brother, but they did not tell her what he had done or what their lives had been like before her. Someday she would learn, and before they sent her off to Hogwarts, they sat down and explained it all from the start. But until she was eleven, she lived a blissfully happy existence completely free of the darkness her brother had lived in for his short life. Of course, there had been rumblings about uprisings here and there, hints of darkness returning from time to time, but even Voldemort's most stalwart supporters could offer nothing in the way of proof, no clear indication that their master might ever return. Dumbledore always swore he might, but James sent his little girl off to school with only normal fears of homesickness and tumbles from her broom. If Voldemort ever returned, James swore he would never come near another Potter. They had given enough.

Turning his attention back to his wife, he gazed into her eyes and saw the glimmer of unshed tears. It broke his heart every time to see her like this. It had been so hard on her when Lydia left for Hogwarts this year, harder than either of them expected. The house suddenly felt so empty, and the pain of losing her firstborn hit Lily all over again. For the first few weeks Lydia was away, James came home every night to find his wife crying in their daughter's room. This week, he came home and couldn't find her anywhere until he finally decided to check the attic. There, he found her sobbing next to a box of Harry's old things, his favourite plush animal clutched tightly in her hands. The sight nearly destroyed him, and he knew he had to do something before the grief swallowed her whole.

As worried as he was about Sirius tonight, he was still more concerned about his wife. Lydia was a healing salve over the ripped open wounds of Harry's death, but he didn't want to leave her alone.

Not tonight. Tonight she would relive that awful nightmare once more, just as she did every year on Halloween. She would scream herself hoarse, just as she had done that night as they watched their home crumble in the flames, their baby boy still inside. He still remembered, in aching clarity, how he had to hold her back, how he'd been afraid she would break free and run into those flames for their boy. He was tempted to do it himself, and he would have if not for her. She would follow him, and the only thing worse than losing Harry was losing Harry and Lily. And so he held her even as she punched and thrashed with all the desperation of a mother whose worst nightmare had come true, the desperation of a mother who knew her baby was dying and there was nothing she could do.

He didn't realise he was crying until Lily reached forward to wipe away a tear. "He would be thirteen now," she whispered. "Our baby...nearly a man."

He clutched her close and allowed his tears to fall into her hair. Some days he wondered how they had survived this, how they had lived twelve years with this hole left by the loss of their sweet, happy, beautiful little boy. Harry had been born with so much promise, and the first time he performed magic, James thought his heart would burst with the pride of it. There was truly nothing like watching a child grow, and that had been stolen from him. And for what? The insane mission of a sociopath? Everyone claimed Harry saved the world that night, but it didn't feel that way to James. His world had never been the same. He had a gorgeous little girl to raise, but nothing could fill the void left by his little man, his little cub. In his darkest moments, James wondered if this was a world worth saving at all.

"Lily," he whispered in anguish.

"You would have taught him to play Quidditch," she mused. "Remember that little broom Sirius bought him? I thought I might kill him for that. I was so worried every time we let Harry on it, but he loved it so much."

He didn't want to play this game tonight. He didn't want to imagine Harry as he could – and never would – be. But it helped Lily. It helped her to picture him the way he ought to be, to imagine the life they would have given him if he survived that night. And for Lily, he

would do anything. "Sirius was determined to spoil him silly," he managed past the tears in his throat.

"I would have let him," Lily admitted. "Never could resist you boys, try as a might. I knew he would be a little Marauder, just like you and Sirius."

"We'd have gotten more owls about him than we do Lydia."

"I bet he would look just like you now. The girls would love him," she sighed and nestled against his chest.

"Oh, I don't know about that. Took me a while to snag the one I wanted."

"You were a prat," she reminded him.

"I believe you once called me an 'arrogant toerag.'"

"Never said you weren't handsome, did I?"

"I suppose not," he chuckled in spite of himself and kissed the top of her head. "I think I know exactly who our Harry would have fallen for."

"Oh really?"

"Ginny Weasley. You know Potter men love a redhead."

"She has grown quite lovely," she agreed. "Lydia likes her. She's a year older, but she made reserve on the house team this year, so she's Lu's hero."

James nodded, not trusting his voice as he imagined his little boy all grown up, playing Quidditch, writing letters home about girls. Their baby boy was only beginning to speak when he died, and they would never have any of this with him. No letters home from school, no man-to-man advice, no girls for Lily to fret over, no letters from exasperated professors when he played a few too many pranks. All the things James imagined for his boy were wiped away with a curse and a fire, and though he rejoiced that Voldemort was gone, he would gladly take the Dark Lord just to have his son back. It was selfish, he knew, but also true. All James had ever wanted was his

family, and peace meant so very little when his son was in the ground.

"I miss him so much, James," Lily whispered. "I don't even know who he would be, but I miss him. I miss...opportunity. Every day we see Lyddie growing and changing and becoming so spectacular, and Harry is just...still. Forever."

"I know, Love," he murmured. "I know."

His wife began to shake with quiet sobs, and he could only hold her. He had no words of comfort tonight, nothing that could take away this awful pain. He was here in hell with her. Most of the time they could carry on, thinking fondly of their beautiful son but no longer dwelling on the hurt and the pain. But Halloween always brought them right back to that night, to the helplessness and the agony of knowing their son was in there beyond their reach.

He smoothed down her hair and let her cry, drawing comfort from her presence in his arms. In his grief, she was light and hope. There had been a time many years ago, when they were still at Hogwarts themselves, when he never thought such a life possible. She hated him then, or at least convinced him of that, and in his sixth year, he nearly gave up. It wasn't until seventh year, when he was Head Boy and finally taking some responsibility for once, that he decided to give it one more go.

And neither of them had ever looked back. They were together all through that final year, and at the end of it, he asked her to marry him. Sometimes he wondered if he had done the right thing, if perhaps she would have been better off with someone else, someone who hadn't given her a cursed son she was fated to lose.

"Do you remember when I proposed to you?" he asked her when her tears had begun to dry.

"Of course I do," she murmured. "One of the best days of my life."

He nodded, heart thrumming with emotion and self-loathing. "I'm so sorry, Lily," he whispered.

"What?" she asked as she drew up in surprise.

"I didn't give you that beautiful life I promised. I wanted...I thought I could give

you everything."

"Oh James, no," she whispered in agony and twisted around to gather him in her arms, kissing away the tears on his cheeks. "You gave me two perfect children, James. I miss Harry every day, but we had a year with him. A whole wonderful year. I wouldn't trade that for anything."

"You deserved a lifetime, Lily."

"And so did you. But I still have a whole lifetime with you, and it's enough, James. It's enough."

"Is it?" he wondered. "I don't know what to do for you, Lily. I don't know how to make it hurt less. Every year I miss him more. I thought someday it would get easier."

"Would you really want it to?" she asked him quietly.

"No," he confessed, shuddering at the thought of this anniversary passing without the pain, without the memories. It would be a dishonour to his brave little boy, and the pain was all he had left to offer Harry.

"You do everything you need to do just by being here, James," his wife assured him softly. "We're always going to miss Harry, but I would rather miss him than never have known him. Don't ever doubt our life together," she murmured. "Don't ever doubt that it's everything I've wanted. You gave me everything, Love. He took away our Harry, not you."

James nodded, but sometimes it didn't feel that way. It was his friend who betrayed them. It was his friend who sold them to Voldemort and caused their baby to be killed. When Lily screamed tonight, it would be because of Peter Pettigrew, because James once called the wrong man his friend. He wished he had never laid eyes on the kid, wished he never felt pity for the boy who was picked on and teased and left out. He and Sirius took the boy in, and he repaid them with his betrayal. They offered him sanctuary, defended

him, made sure no one hurt or cursed him, and he took away the boy James loved more than life.

Azkaban was too good for Peter. James was not a vengeful man by nature, but he hoped the memories were truly awful, and he hoped Peter was still sane enough to suffer. James had lived with this pain for twelve years. Lily had lived with this pain, and for that alone he would have tortured Peter with his own hands.

Their Harry had no future because of Peter Pettigrew, and Monday, James decided, he was going on a little visit to see how the miserable rat was faring. He needed to see, needed to know the traitor suffered as much as they did.

But tonight, his focus was Lily. Only Lily. She had seen him through everything, she had given him Lydia, she had never blamed him for his foolishness and somehow found the strength to keep going day after day. She gave him courage, and he would hold her tonight and keep her safe. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too, James. So much."

He smoothed down her hair and kissed her temple.

"Are you sure you don't want to check on Sirius?"

He did, but he would never tell her that. His wife might understand and forgive him for leaving her tonight, but just for now, his best mate could manage on his own. After the weekend, the two of them would take off and go for a romp in the woods, then drink firewhiskey while Sirius finally confessed what bothered him this Halloween.

Twelve years ago tonight, James and Lily lost their son. Tonight, he would honour his beloved boy's memory with Lily in his arms.

A/N: Thank you so much for the excellent responses so far! I'm so excited to see people enjoying my story! This chapter is a shorter bit, but I hope you'll still enjoy it! I'm nervous about introducing my OC, so I'd love to hear thoughts so far on my character and the story in general! I also hope everyone is having a wonderful holiday season! Since this is a shorter chapter, I'll plan to post a new chapter sooner than a week this time. Enjoy!

Chapter Three

Lydia Potter did not, as a rule, like Halloween. She suspected, when she watched other children around her, that the day was supposed to be some sort of holiday. There seemed to be all sorts of fun activities and decorations and food of all kinds, but in the Potter household, it had always been a day of mourning.

When she was too young to understand, it only made her sad to see her parents and her Uncle Sirius weeping. Before she was old enough to be taught about her brother, she watched mummy break down throughout the day, saw daddy hugging her and crying quietly to himself. Uncle Sirius stayed all day on Halloween, sometimes through the night as well. He cried, too, and that had scared her most of all, because Uncle Sirius was always fun and happy and let her play with anything she wanted even if mummy would have said no. She still remembered wanting Remus on those nights, wishing he would come and explain the odd behaviour, or perhaps take her somewhere else and read her stories, as he had always done. Her godfather always went away on Halloween, and she hated it. Why couldn't he come play with her while everyone else cried and looked at some old book of pictures?

Later, Mum and Dad told her about Harry. Harry James Potter was her brother, they said, and she had never met him because he died before she was born. He died in a terrible accident on Halloween, and so they didn't celebrate that day like the rest of the Wizarding World. They honoured Baby Harry's memory on that day instead. But to a little Lydia, a brother was an unknown, abstract thing. She envied her friends, who ate sweets and played fun games on Halloween while her parents insisted on dragging her to a creepy cemetery to stare at a stone that ought to mean something but never did. She wanted to carve up a pumpkin and eat candy, not spend all night listening to her crying parents and sitting in the cold graveyard.

When she finally grew older, she began to realise what she lost that terrible night. When she was old enough to truly understand the concept of a brother, she realised there was a part of her life that was missing. She ought to have a big brother to play with, a big brother who would help her fly, a big brother who would probably like going to Quidditch matches and playing Exploding Snap and visiting Remus and Uncle Sirius. But she would never have that. She would never even have a chance to know him. There would always only be that stone in the graveyard, and sometimes she hated him, hated him for not being here, hated him for not even knowing who she was. It seemed unfair that he died before she even existed, and she could mourn him and he could never do the same for her.

After that, she hated Halloween because it reminded her of what she never had. She stopped begrudging her parents those sad rituals and sat beside her big brother's grave and imagined what he would have been like. She used to make up stories in her mind about adventures they would go on together, even though Briallen, her best friend, insisted that big brothers were mean and bossy. Lydia decided Harry would not have been either of those things, and he would have loved her, just as she would have loved him. She carried on whole conversations in her head, imagined the things they would have talked about, the advice he would have given her. He would have known how to get her out of trouble the time she stole Dad's broom. He would have told her what to say to the mean bully at primary who took her lunch. He would have known that she shouldn't use magic on him, as it got her in more trouble than she'd ever been in even though she swore it wasn't really her fault. Harry would have known those things, because he was older and bigger and smarter.

It was odd to think of him that way, odd to imagine him bigger than her when he was forever stuck as a baby in her mind. In all the pictures, he was just a tiny baby, a cute, happy thing, but so little. It seemed impossible to imagine him two years older and wiser, dispensing brotherly advice and helping her out of trouble.

All Lydia's short life, her brother Harry was just her brother. She sensed the vague emptiness in their house, the room that her mum claimed was a guest room but no one ever slept in, the boxes forever untouched, the pictures eternally displayed on the mantle, never changing, never moving. She hated thinking of it, hated

thinking that it was her brother who died in the awful fire, but for eleven years she believed it nothing more than a senseless accident that kept her from knowing her big brother.

This year, her parents told her the truth. This year, they knew she would hear from everyone else. She was a bit of a celebrity at Hogwarts, the sister of the boy who vanquished Voldemort, an evil wizard she had barely even heard of. And so this year, shortly before she left for Hogwarts, her parents sat down with her on the sofa, an old picture album open to a picture of Harry.

"There's something you ought to know about your brother, Lulu," her dad said. "Something we need you to understand before you leave for school."

"The others are probably going to talk about him and ask about him, Darling," her mum added.

"Why?" she asked in confusion. "Why do they care about Harry?"

"We haven't told you everything about your brother, Lu," her mom answered gently and reached to take her hand. "We only kept it from you because you were too young to understand, but we've decided you're old enough now."

She nodded, not at all sure what they could be talking about. Harry was a cute baby, but he was just a baby. What could be so special about him that all the other kids would ask questions?

"Before you were born, there was a war going on, Lu," her dad explained. "There was a very bad wizard named Voldemort who wanted to do a lot of bad things. He believed that some wizards, witches like your mum, for instance, weren't as good as others."

"Like Mum?" she furrowed her brow, not understanding.

"Muggleborns, Sweetheart," her mum supplied. "Voldemort believed that only Purebloods were really worthy of magic. He managed to convince a lot of people of that, and it was a very frightening time."

"Your mum and I fought in the war. We worked for a group that was trying to defeat him, but he was a very powerful wizard. No one could beat him. We kept trying and trying, but nothing worked. Then

your mum...well, she found out she was pregnant with Harry. We were scared about the war, but we were so happy to be having him."

"A baby is always a wonderful thing," her mum smiled, reaching over to ruffle her hair. But there was no missing the tears in her eyes.

"And he was wonderful," her dad added. "But right before he was born, someone made a prophecy. Do you know what that is?" he asked.

"Yes," she nodded. "But Remus says they aren't often right."

"Sometimes they are," her mum said quietly. "But Sweetheart, prophecies are right because....because someone believes in them. That's what gives them power."

"Was the prophecy about Harry?"

"Yes," her mum nodded. "We didn't know for sure, but it was about a baby who would be born at the end of July. The prophecy said that he would be the one with the power to defeat Voldemort."

"There was another boy it could have been. You may meet him at Hogwarts, but it's up to him to tell you his story," her dad added. "When we realised that Voldemort believed Harry may be his enemy, we went into hiding. Right here in Godric's Hollow, at our old house. We did a very special magic, a magic that would hide us from anyone except our Secret Keeper."

"James," her mum scolded lightly, giving her dad that look that Lydia knew to mean he was saying too much. Sometimes her mum looked at him that way when he'd said a bad word, a word she wasn't supposed to hear.

"She has a right to know, Lil. The others will talk about him."

"Talk about who?" she asked curiously.

"The man that we picked, Lulu, the man we picked to hide us...he had been a friend at Hogwarts. A man named Peter."

"But what about Remus? Or Uncle Sirius?"

"It was supposed to be your Uncle Sirius, Love," her mum answered gently. "Because he's your dad's best mate. But Sirius was afraid for us, and he knew that Voldemort and his followers would guess that he was the one who could find us. So he suggested Peter."

"And Peter betrayed us," her dad answered darkly. "He's in Azkaban now, Lu. He will be for the rest of his life for what he did."

"He...he told the bad guy where you were?" she asked, swallowing hard and feeling so incredibly sad. How could he do that? She told her best friend everything, and Briallen always promised to keep her secrets. She didn't even have anything important to say, only things like the boy she thought was sort of cute, or the biscuits she'd taken when her mum told her not to.

"He did," her mum nodded. "And Voldemort attacked us."

"He did what?" she asked fearfully, not at all liking this story.

"He came to the house and attacked us. We tried to get to Harry, but he was asleep in his room, and Voldemort cursed us so we didn't have time. When we woke up, the house was on fire."

"Is he still alive?" she asked, suddenly feeling frantic. What if Voldemort was still alive? What if he was going to try to attack them again? What if he came after her mum and dad?

"No, Sweetheart," her mum assured her quickly. "He's gone. He can never hurt anyone again."

"But then-"

"It was Harry," her dad stopped her. "We don't know how. When we woke up and tried to go to him..." he stopped abruptly, and she realised in horror that he was going to cry. She always hated seeing him cry, and it only happened when he talked about Harry. It was the only time her strong daddy, her protector, ever broke down in tears. And her mum could be of no help right now, for she was crying, too. For the first time, Lydia truly understood the loss, understood what happened. They had only been too late to save Harry. They were attacked, but they were here when the fire started, here when her brother died. And no one had been able to save him.

"Voldemort tried to attack Harry, but it killed him," her dad finally finished.

"But how?" she asked weakly. "He was just a little baby."

"We don't know, Love," her mum answered. "Voldemort was killed, and something happened. By the time we woke up, it was too late to help Harry."

"Your brother defeated him, Lu," her dad told her seriously and cupped her cheeks in his hand. "Your brother ended the war. Only he died to do it."

At first, there had been shock. Shock that her brother, a not-so-special, ordinary baby was the one who put an end to a war. Then came the anger that they kept it from her, that she never knew, in all those years, that her big brother was a hero. Next came guilt for all those years of ungratefulness, all those years she sort of begrudged her brother for getting in the way of her fun. Harry had died for them. For all of them. He was only a baby, and he saved the world from a war. It was a bit unfair to want Halloween to herself when her big brother died to save lives, and she hated herself, just a little, for being a spoiled, selfish brat who never realised why her brother had to die. Perhaps she didn't get the sweets and the games, but she could go off to Hogwarts now and make friends and learn things and play Quidditch. She had a lifetime with her parents, full of fun holidays and happy memories, like baking biscuits with her mum or learning to fly with her dad.

Harry died so she could have that. He was only a baby, incapable of thinking of such things, but he died just the same and saved the world in doing it. She had a happy, easy childhood because Harry did not. And she vowed to herself the moment she stepped on the Hogwarts Express that she would make her brother proud, that she would live for him and enjoy every moment that he never would.

But tonight, she felt guilty all over again. She had been secretly relieved to be away this year at Halloween, relieved she didn't have to partake of the sad ritual and could honour her brother's memory in her own way. She had wanted to do something special, something just between herself and the memory of her brother, something to show him that she thought of him, admired him, and

even, in some strange way, missed him. She took these thoughts to her favourite professor, Professor Sprout, and received from her a crimson anemone seed. Over tea, Professor Sprout told her the legend of Adonis and of the lovely flower planted each year in memory of his life and death. And so Lydia planned to take the seed out on the grounds and take care of it, casting all the proper charms and tending to it each day to make sure it grew, a little reminder of Harry here at the school he would never see. He would like that, she decided. The brother she imagined would like being remembered that way, and he would like even more that it was just for them.

She planned for it to be a quiet, private affair. She didn't like being known because her brother was dead. And now that her parents had come, something most parents weren't even allowed to do, there was no hope of just being Lydia Potter tonight. Tonight she was Harry Potter's sister, and she didn't want to resent him for it, didn't want to resent her parents for needing her, but when did she get to be a normal girl? Harry was gone, and she had never known him. She would forever honour his memory, but she was tired of mourning for someone who never even knew she existed. She wanted to plant her flower, tell her brother that she wished he was here, and then move on with her life.

But it wasn't in the stars. The owl arrived early this week from her dad, explaining that they didn't want to be apart from her tonight and had decided to come for a visit, then spend the weekend in Hogsmeade to be near to her. She wanted to see them, of course; it had been two months now without them, but she was the only one whose parents came to the feast. Everyone would be looking at her, just like they always did. Sometimes she wished it was because she was funny and smart, not because she had a dead brother. None of them knew it was like to be the only one left, the child who was left behind. None of them knew the subtext behind that letter: her parents were hurting and she was the only one who could help. Without Harry, they needed Lydia. Sometimes it felt like an awful lot, and her brother was a hero. She was just a little girl who liked flying and talking to her friends.

"Hi, Lydia," Ginny Weasley greeted her as she dragged herself into the common room after bidding her parents goodnight. "Have a nice Halloween?"

"I suppose," she sighed dramatically, feeling rather melancholy and wishing she could be more like Ginny Weasley with her big family and all her siblings. Perhaps there was a little less pressure when your mum had six others to attend to. "What's it like having all those brothers, Ginny?" she couldn't help asking.

"It's all right, I guess," Ginny grinned and tossed a smirk towards a redhead sitting on the sofa with Hermione Granger.

"Hey!" Ron protested.

"This one's a real prat, but with seven children, I suppose there had to be one, right, Ron?"

Lydia laughed aloud as Ron threw a pillow at his younger sister. The two bickered for a moment, and Lydia very suddenly felt tears sting her eyes. This is what it would be like, she realised. In fact, her brother would be in Ron's year, and like her, he probably would have been a Gryffindor. She ought to be here with her brother this year, affectionately ribbing one another and swapping sweets from mum and hitting each other with pillows.

"Are you all right, Lydia?" Hermione asked kindly from her place on the sofa, setting aside a rather large book to look at her. Lydia didn't know the other girl well, but she was friends with Ron and Ginny, and everyone was always talking about how clever she was. Inexplicably, Lydia found herself thinking about Harry's anemone and how she never planted it. It was far too late to risk sneaking out, especially with her parents just down the way in Hogsmeade. They would never forgive her if she got in trouble tonight, of all nights, but it wouldn't be the same if she planted it tomorrow. Today was the anniversary of his death, and the shining tears began to pour down her cheeks as she thought about him. She wronged him somehow, neglected to honour him tonight, whinged about her parents ruining her Halloween and didn't even plant his flower.

Seeing the tears, Ginny quickly ended the pillow attack with her brother and wrapped her arms around Lydia. Hermione soon joined them, ushering her over to the sofa.

"I'm sorry," Lydia whimpered.

"Don't be," Hermione shook her head. "It must be very hard, especially when everyone else is celebrating."

Perhaps Lydia should be surprised that Hermione realised the date, and what it meant, but she wasn't. Hermione was just like that. She knew everything, and she would understand, too. And if Hermione knew, no doubt the Weasleys did as well.

"What if he thinks I abandoned him?" she cried softly. "He would probably hate me!"

"Of course he wouldn't," Ginny countered.

"I didn't even know him. He was gone before I was born, but I wanted to do something for him. I had a flower. An anemone. And I didn't even get to plant it! My parents came and I...I didn't!"

"You still can," Hermione encouraged gently. "Would you like me to show you? We can do some special charms and keep it alive inside. We could put it here in the Common Room for everyone to see, or you could keep it in the dormitory, just for you."

"We can do that?" she sniffled.

"Of course," Hermione smiled. "It's magic, isn't it?"

"Could we put it here?" she asked hopefully. "I think I would like that. He would have been a Gryffindor. I know he would."

Ginny smoothed down her hair as Hermione nodded again. "Go get it and I'll show you how."

Lydia took a few deep breaths to come herself, then hurried up the stairs to her dormitory to retrieve the seed. When she returned, only Ginny and Hermione remained in the room, and Hermione had conjured up a lovely little flower pot, soil and all. The three of them sat together as Lydia tenderly planted the seed, and then Hermione quietly explained all the charms that would keep the air around the plant the proper temperature and allow it to thrive here inside Gryffindor Tower.

"Would you like to say something?" Hermione asked her kindly.

"I...I guess," she answered uncertainly. She had never talked out loud to her brother, not with other people around. Sometimes at his grave she would whisper a few things, tell him about herself, but it seemed silly then, and infinitely more silly now. But Ginny and Hermione were waiting patiently, and perhaps they didn't think it was quite so foolish at all. "I never got to know you, Harry," she finally said softly. "But I wish I had. I bet you'd be very brave, like Dad. And really nice, like Mum. I'm in my first year at Hogwarts now, and I wish you were here with me. But I'll always think about you. Mum and Dad loved you a lot, Harry. And so did Uncle Sirius. He was your godfather. Remus is mine, but I think he loved you, too. I don't know if you can miss someone you never knew, but I think I miss you. And I want you to know that I'll always remember you. I hope where you are isn't scary and you know that we love you."

"For Harry," Hermione whispered.

"For Harry," Ginny echoed.

Lydia let herself be hugged by the girls and hoped, wherever he was, Harry wasn't alone tonight.

A/N: An early update, as a reward for the short update and your patience with my OC! I'm always hesitant about OCs as a reader, since we read fanfiction to spend more time with our beloved established characters, but Lydia is important to this story and I'm glad she was well received! As another note, I'd like to point out that this is a largely character-driven story, and as such, may feel a bit slow at times. I hope you'll bear with me...I've tried to make this as realistic as possible, and that means Harry is going to inch along towards recovery, both physical and emotional. I PROMISE it will start to pick up, and you will start to get some answers! As some incentive to stick with me, here's a mystery: Lily and James are still alive. There's a reason, and you will find out...eventually. And it's going to get complicated.

Read and review! Thanks so much to everyone who has already commented, favorited, alerted, etc.!

Chapter Four

Sirius sat awake all night next to the boy he now felt certain, in his heart, was their Harry. Watching him sleep brought back memories long buried, memories of watching him when he was still an infant, of rocking him to sleep in his arms. His black hair had been little tufts then, impossibly soft and incredibly adorable, and Sirius couldn't resist running his fingers through it now. It was too long and needed washing, but they could take care of that in the morning. For now, he was focused on watching his godson to make sure he didn't worsen through the night.

Shortly after Remus left, Harry began to shiver in his sleep. Sirius counted it a small victory, a sign that Harry was growing strong enough to warm himself even though it was painful and disturbing to watch the child suffer. He was still terribly cold and startlingly pale, and though the blue tinge receded from his lips, they were left waxy and bloodless.

The guilt began to gnaw on him as he sent Kreacher out for all the necessary potions. Healing was Lily's domain, especially with her own child. She was the one who ought to be here nursing him back to health, and James should be here pacing and worrying until his boy was back on his feet. He wondered if he was doing the right thing keeping such a secret from them, but there was still a chance he was wrong. And even if he was right, Harry probably had no idea

he was a wizard, much less that he had parents who still loved him with everything in them. After nearly freezing to death on a park bench, what more could the boy handle right now? He couldn't very well thrust total strangers on the boy and call them his parents. The last time he'd spoken, he was confused and incoherent, hardly up for an announcement that would probably hit like a bludger to the gut.

And so the task fell to Sirius, and the weight of responsibility felt heavy on his chest. He was not the nurturing Marauder, and he left advice and caretaking to Remus while he himself took on the role of entertainer for Lydia. As he sat holding Harry's cold hands in his and listening to each strained breath, he could only hope he was doing the right thing, that he would not inadvertently kill the child. He was warmer than he had been when he arrived, but his temperature was still dangerously low. Every now and then, his breathing seemed to stall for a moment before his thin chest would lurch and he would begin again. Each time, Sirius squeezed the hands a little tighter and begged the boy to keep breathing.

When Kreacher returned with the potions, Sirius had to Rennervate the boy to wake him enough to swallow without choking. "Come on, open up," Sirius encouraged as Harry fought him in confused delirium. "Drink it down," he insisted, tipping a bit of foul-smelling potion into his mouth. Harry coughed and sputtered in protest, but it was imperative that he swallow. "A little more," Sirius coaxed, holding him as tight as he dared and quickly pouring the potion down his throat. He clamped the boy's mouth closed until he finally swallowed, hating himself a little as terror filled Harry's face.

Thankfully, the first potion was the worst, filled with a powdery substance that looked and smelled like charcoal. The second was an odd purple colour, smoking slightly but not quite as odorous. Harry seemed to be giving up his fight and only weakly protested this time, eventually swallowing the whole potion before curling in on himself again.

"Good job," Sirius praised. "I know it's awful. You've done well. Sleep now," he encouraged. He once more covered the boy up with the blankets, casting the warming charms once more to make sure they remained effective. The potions had quickly taken hold, and the shivering abruptly stopped as Harry succumbed to exhaustion once more.

Convinced the boy would be sleeping a while, Sirius made himself comfortable in the armchair and allowed himself to doze just after the first bits of sunlight crept beneath the curtains. His restless, bothered dreams were cut short just a few hours later, however, by a voice calling for him through the fireplace.

"Sirius Orion Black!" the person insisted rudely. "Don't make me step through, Padfoot!"

Sirius woke with a start, glancing over to the boy who was still sleeping, albeit fitfully now, on the sofa.

"SIRIUS!" the voice bellowed again.

"James!" Sirius panicked, knowing he could not allow his friend to step through, lest he receive the shock of his life. Quickly, he stuck his head into flames. "Prongs, what time is it? What's the emergency?"

"Finally. Where were you, mate?"

"Sleeping," he growled. "Like normal people in the morning."

"The day is young and full of promise. Want to join us in Hogsmeade? Dumbledore is letting us take Lyddie Lu for the day," James said cheerfully. Sirius wasn't entirely fooled – he could tell his friend was exhausted – but sometimes it was easier to just pretend. And right now was one of those moments.

"I'm all right. A bit sleepy. I didn't sleep well last night," he said honestly.

The smile instantly disappeared from his friend's face. "Us either."

"Lily insisted you call, then?" he asked knowingly.

"Of course," James sighed. "But I am worried about you, Padfoot. I wish you'd been with us last night."

Sirius felt another wave of horrid guilt. He'd been up all night tending to Harry while James mourned the boy and faced the same nightmares of him dying in that fire. Just a little longer, he told

himself, and then you'll tell them the truth. "I'm all right," he assured his best mate. "Think I'll take a kip."

"Lulu would love to see you. Dinner at the Three Broomsticks tonight? On me?" James tried again.

"Tell your lovely wife I promise I will not off myself or any of the other terrible things she's thinking," he responded wryly, imagining Lily standing right next to James kicking him to demand he keep going until he received some sort of acquiescence.

"It isn't just Lily, you know."

"I do know," he agreed, "but I've promised I'm all right. I'll call if I need you, yeah?"

"I don't like it, but if you insist. I can't even convince you with a little emotional blackmail? Remind you that you haven't seen Lydia since she left for school?"

"Lydia received an enormous supply of Honeydukes and Zonko's products yesterday. She'll carry on."

"All right, Padfoot. Get some rest."

"Have fun with your witches. Tell your little one I expect a detailed letter next time, not this 'thank you and good day' nonsense."

James laughed and disconnected the firecall, finally leaving Sirius in peace. When he turned around, however, he saw Harry sitting up with wide glassy eyes, staring at what he'd just seen.

"Hello there," Sirius greeted, pretending Harry had seen nothing unusual. "How are you feeling?"

The boy shook his head and said nothing, still staring at the fireplace and the dying green flames. Sirius got up and carefully approached him, noticing as he drew closer that Harry was a bit sweaty now. As he reached out a palm to check his temperature, Harry drew in a wheezing gasp and began to cough.

Almost instantly, Sirius regretted not taking him to St. Mungo's, or even a muggle hospital. His cough sounded terrible, and beads of

sweat were forming on his pale forehead. "Shh, it's all right," he tried to soothe, but Harry was growing distressed in his illness and didn't want to be calmed. "Kreacher, bring the Pepper-Up!" he called for the house-elf.

"As Master Black wishes," Kreacher bowed when he popped into the room with another vial of the stuff. Harry didn't even react to the appearance of the strange beast, and though it was a relief he didn't have to explain house-elves, he took it as a bad sign that Harry hadn't even noticed.

"All right, Kid. You need to drink this," he explained. "You'll feel better when you do." He held it up to Harry's lips, but Harry fought him and pursed his lips, refusing to allow even a drop of it into his mouth. It was really no surprise; he undoubtedly remembered nothing of the night before, and now some strange man was attempting to pour strange substances down his throat. After what the kid witnessed in the fireplace, it was a bloody miracle he wasn't screaming his head off. He was just incoherent and weak enough not to run away in terror, but the instinct for self-preservation was ridiculously strong. "It's all right," Sirius attempted to soothe. "I won't hurt you."

But Harry was stronger than he looked, even in his current condition. He flailed desperately against his captor, nearly causing Sirius to lose his grasp on the small vial.

"You need this, Kid," he tried to explain. "It's medicine. You're ill, and you need to drink."

"No!" Harry cried and continued his fight. "No, I won't!"

He was going to exhaust himself at any moment, so Sirius backed away and allowed Harry to catch his breath. He was wheezing terribly and needed the potions, but it would do no good to push him to collapse. "I promise I'm not going to hurt you," Sirius murmured after Harry had a chance to calm himself. "I'll take a sip, see?" he asked, taking a tiny gulp of the potion to prove it wasn't harmful. "You need it to feel better."

Harry did not look anymore convinced, so in one swift motion, Sirius moved to his side, prised open his jaw, and poured the vial down his throat. Harry didn't have time to fight, but there were suddenly tears

in his eyes when his ears began to smoke. Normally it was a comical thing to watch, but Harry was so sick and confused and not at all accustomed to the whimsical side effect of the potion.

"It's all right, it's all right," Sirius promised him. "It's normal. You'll feel better soon."

But Harry continued to cough and cry until there was nothing Sirius could do for him except rub his back and his chest to help clear his lungs and soothe him. He at least didn't shy away from Sirius's touch this time, but perhaps being in out of the cold rain was incentive enough to stay put, even if he was afraid what Sirius might do to him.

"You're safe here," he vowed, hoping that would ease a few of Harry's concerns. "You're safe. Nothing can happen. I won't harm you."

Harry coughed again, his eyes bright with fever and pain. For the first time, Sirius understood Lily's panic the first time Harry had been ill as a baby, or the time Lydia had come down with dragon pox and cried inconsolably for a week straight. For an insane moment, he thought of calling for her, begging her to come relieve him of the burden and worry of caring for a sick child, but he quickly brushed it off and remembered that Remus would arrive soon.

"Can you try to sleep some more?" Sirius asked when the boy finally began to calm a little. The coughing spells eased up, but he was still congested and feverish.

"W-where am I?" Harry asked weakly.

"At my house. You probably don't remember from last night. My name is Sirius," he explained gently. "I found you at the park. You were nearly frozen through, so I brought you back here. You're very ill, but you'll feel better soon."

"I can't..." the boy coughed. "No money."

"Shh. You've nothing to worry about. Just rest," he insisted, helping Harry lay back down and cancelling the warming charms that would undoubtedly worsen his fever.

"Sorry," the boy whispered. "Sorry, Sir."

"Sirius," he corrected gently. "You can call me Sirius. And you've no need to apologise. I know you're frightened, but you can trust me. You'll be safe here. I won't do anything that will harm you. Can you try to sleep again?"

The boy nodded, then promptly dropped off to sleep once more. He tugged the blanket up halfway, just to keep him comfortable, then smoothed down the messy hair with a rush of affection. With a weary sigh, he rose again and grabbed a handful of Floo powder, tossing it into the flames and placing a call for Remus's office.

"Sirius!" his friend greeted with far more haste than usual. "How is he?"

"Not well," he answered grimly. "He's ill this morning. A fever and a nasty cough."

"Did you get any potions into him?"

"He put up a fight. Surprisingly strong little bugger."

"But he drank?"

"I didn't give him a choice. He swallowed the Pepper-Up."

"That's good, at least. Shall I come through?"

"I could use the help," Sirius admitted, stepping back to allow his friend room to step through the fireplace. Remus arrived just moments later, instantly setting his sights on the sleeping boy. Sirius heaved a great sigh of relief that Remus was here to help; after enduring the curse of lycanthropy for most of his life, the werewolf was nearly as well-versed in healing as any qualified medi-wizard, and he would make sure Sirius didn't kill the boy before James and Lily even laid eyes on him.

Quietly, Remus knelt beside the boy and cast a few diagnostic spells. Harry didn't stir, even when Remus placed his hand on his forehead and cast a few refreshing charms to clear the sweat from his face. Remus was frowning slightly at the results, and it was little wonder, as small and frail as the boy was. "It could be worse, as bad off as

he was," Remus finally announced. "But he's anemic from the malnutrition, and after all he endured last night, he's suffering a respiratory infection."

Sirius called for Kreacher again and had Remus list off the next batch of potions the boy would need. Remus was exceedingly patient with the barmy old elf, even though Kreacher tried to insist he didn't take orders from filthy "half-breeds." A sharp glare from Sirius, and the pitiful thing popped away to the apothecary.

"Did you give him aconite last night?" Remus questioned.

"A child's dose," he nodded, "so don't touch any empty vials."

Remus shuddered a bit and moved away from the empty glass vials on the small end table. "He could probably stand another today, but make sure not to give him too much. He's small enough to inadvertently poison. He drank it willingly?"

"Not willingly," he grimaced, "but he didn't fight me too much. I'm not certain what I'll do when he's awake enough to really question me."

"I located a charm last night to identify him. As much as I hate to do anything

without properly asking him, I think perhaps it's best done while he's asleep. It may be easier to explain who – and what – he is when we know for certain," Remus offered logically. "It's also going to require a bit of blood, and right now he can't protest."

Sirius winced at the idea of taking the boy's blood without his consent, but he knew Remus was right. If they waited until he woke, they would have to earn his trust and speak in vague generalities about who he might be. He might think them mental and run at the first chance he could seize. "What do we do?" he asked warily.

"It's only a drop of blood. Do you have an empty vial?"

Sirius nodded and retrieved a clean one from the kitchen. Remus picked up one of Harry's hands, both men watching to make sure it didn't rouse him from his heavy slumber. The boy slept on, so Remus directed his wand to his finger and held the vial up to it. He whispered an incantation, then very gently squeezed a drop of blood

into the vial from the tiny incision. Harry winced a little and shifted in his sleep from the pain, but he did not awaken.

"Now what?" Sirius asked nervously.

Remus didn't answer, but his hands were shaking as he held the vial with one hand and pointed his wand with the other. "Sanguis revelio," he murmured. The vial glowed beautifully for one instant, a deep crimson glow that seemed to radiate heat, then faded once more as cursive script suddenly wound around the glass.

Moony's hand trembled and his face blanched as he read the words. Sirius could not read from where he was standing, but from the look on his friend's face, he didn't need to. It was Harry. That boy who nearly died on the park bench, the boy he sat with all night...it was Harry. Their lost boy, the missing piece of all of them, the boy whose death Sirius had carried on his shoulders for twelve desperately long years. He was here, worse for wear and ragged and ill, but still miraculously alive.

Sirius didn't know whether to cry or to whoop with joy. Harry. The baby he held in his arms, the baby he placed on the little toy broom and supervised during little flights around the house. Harry. The sweet little infant with big green eyes and a laugh that delighted and entranced them all. Where have you been, Harry? he longed to ask, and how did you get away?

Needing to be near his godson, Sirius stepped over to the sofa and sat down next to the sleeping boy. He looked so innocent in his sleep, nothing more than a child in desperate need of a safe, warm home as he was always meant to have. How could he be missing for twelve horrible years, and how had he even managed to stay alive on his own? He hadn't been cared for, not recently, at least, but he was only thirteen! When Sirius was thirteen, he couldn't even be trusted to do his homework or stay awake during class. How did Harry provide even the bare essentials for himself? Why wasn't he safe in someone's home with all the clothing and food and love a boy his age needed?

There were no answers forthcoming, and Harry was far too ill for questions. For now, Sirius could only accept the strange gift he was given and hope that the little boy wasn't too lost in his darkness, that they could shelter him from ever hurting this way again. "You're

home, Harry," he whispered and placed a hand on the child's cheek again. "You've found your way home."

Lydia awoke the morning after Halloween feeling infinitely better. The little seed in the Common Room was going to grow into a lovely flower for Harry, and the sad day had passed for another year. They muddled through once more, and this time she had friends who understood, who had helped her honour Harry. It helped, knowing she wasn't alone, knowing that other people remembered his sacrifice, too. Her big brother was a hero, and she was glad others knew it as she did.

Her good mood could also be attributed to the note Artemis carried to her this morning. Her mum and dad had spent the night in Hogsmeade and arranged with Professor Dumbledore to take her out for the day. Students in first and second year weren't allowed to go to Hogsmeade on the weekend...except with a parental escort. It was rare that parents would drop in for the weekend to take their children away from school and homework and the other various happenings over the weekend, but her parents would be here in one hour to pick her up and take her into town for a day of shopping, followed by dinner with Remus at the Three Broomsticks. Her roommates eyed her jealously, and she had to admit, she liked it, just a little. After the terrible night she had last night, she earned it, she decided. She was mourning a brother while everyone celebrated the holiday, so it was only fair that she should get to spend her day in Hogsmeade while they studied or played Exploding Snap to pass the time.

She was ready quicker than usual as she excitedly showered and dressed in jeans and a warm jumper for her outing. The rest of her friends were probably still sleeping, but when she descended from her room, she found Ginny already in the Common Room.

"Good morning!" Lydia brightly greeted the redheaded girl.

"Morning," Ginny smiled at her.

"You're up early."

"Couldn't sleep. Too hungry," Ginny admitted sheepishly. "It's a Weasley thing. Why are you awake?"

"Mum and Dad are taking me to Hogsmeade."

"Ooh, that's wonderful!" Ginny said, obvious jealousy in her tone though she smiled generously. "Ron and Hermione are going. I can't because I'm still a second year," she sighed.

"I'm only allowed because Mum and Dad are here."

"I went once with my brother, Bill. It's loads of fun! Have you been to Zonko's? It's brilliant!"

"My Uncle Sirius always sends me stuff, but I haven't been yet! I hope my dad will take me. We'll get you something!" she promised. The other girl blushed, and Lydia remembered some of the meaner girls talking about how the Weasleys didn't have much money. She hoped bringing Ginny a gift wouldn't embarrass her, but decided perhaps she would bring Hermione something as well, as a thank you for last night and so Ginny wouldn't feel uncomfortable about accepting it.

Though she would never confess it to anyone but her mum, Lydia had rather envied Ginny since the moment she met her. Ginny was only in second year, but she had boldly tried out for the Quidditch team. Second years, especially girls, rarely made House teams, but Ginny was put on the reserves and was quite good. Everyone expected her to be made a full Chaser in her third year. The older girl wasn't as clever as Hermione, but she did well in all of her classes, and everyone liked her. Last night, she proved to be kind as well. It was everything Lydia aspired to be, and she was glad they were becoming friends.

"Shall we get breakfast?" Ginny suggested.

"Yes, I'm famished!" Lydia agreed.

The two girls scarfed down breakfast, joined by Ron and Hermione just as they were finishing up. Hermione launched into a rather long discourse on the historical sights in Hogsmeade and the finer points of the only all-wizarding village in England, and Ron and Ginny both rolled their eyes comically as Hermione failed to notice anyone's disinterest in her lecture.

"Lydia, won't your mum and dad be here soon?" Ginny finally asked when Hermione stopped for air, abruptly ending the conversation. They would, actually, so Lydia didn't feel guilty about escaping.

Less than an hour later, Lydia was with her dad in the joke shop as they carefully perused each aisle. "Is Uncle Sirius coming to dinner tonight?" she asked hopefully as she wound her way through Zonko's, careful not to miss anything. "I need to thank him for my Halloween package! Artemis could hardly carry it!"

"A good loot this year, then?" her dad asked.

"Yes," she nodded happily. "And plenty of Sugar Quills. He never forgets!"

"He's very good at that," her father agreed with a grin. "What about Remus?"

"Dad, you know what Remus gives me every year," she rolled her eyes. "For every birthday and holiday, and sometimes just because."

"Hmm, dungbombs?"

"Dad."

"Fireworks?"

"Dad!"

"Or was it-"

"You're crazy, Dad," she cut him off.

"I must be," he agreed, "to be buying my daughter more pranks. How many owls do you reckon your mum and I have received from McGonagall so far?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she answered innocently and smiled at him. He tried to look stern, then picked up another item and tossed it in her basket. Lydia beamed happily, knowing her dad would never be the one to fault her for mischief, so long as she didn't do anything too disruptive. Though her mum knew nothing about it, her dad had taken her aside one night shortly before she

left for Hogwarts and explained the finer art of pranking and a few of the lessons he learned along the way. More than one professor had indicated high hopes that she took mostly after her mother, but within a few weeks of school, it was quite clear she picked up a few things from her father.

To be fair, she rarely got in trouble for playing jokes. She did inherit some of her mum's sensibilities and knew when to draw the line, but her mouth...well, it hadn't quite caught up yet. She enjoyed talking far too much to be bothered with paying attention in classes, and her head of house pulled her aside at least once a week to inform her about a new owl sent home to her parents.

"Just keep up with your studies, Lu," her dad admonished. It was a common refrain in his letters, and for some reason, it always affected her more than her mum's earnest pleas for her to pay attention and try harder in classes. Her dad, she knew, had been a prankster at Hogwarts. Uncle Sirius would regale her with all the stories that Remus and her dad would not, and she knew he'd gotten into far more trouble than he would ever admit to her. She also knew it almost kept him from ever dating her mother. Her dad's quiet admonition was not meant to pressure her into getting better grades, or to chastise her for bad behaviour. Remus always told her that her father learned from his mistakes and became the kind of man her mum respected, and that was why they were so happily married now. When her dad said it, it was because he wanted her to be happy. And so she always listened to him, trying to take his advice to heart.

"I know, Dad," she nodded. "I'm trying. I'm just dead awful at Potions. I think Professor Snape hates me."

Her dad's face suddenly grew solemn. "I am quite certain he does, Lydia," he answered seriously.

"Why? I swear I didn't do anything, Dad! More than usual, I mean," she admitted.

"I don't want to know what that means," he warned her. "I'll pretend I didn't hear it."

"All right, Dad," she smiled innocently.

"Good girl. And Professor Snape does not dislike you for anything you did. He dislikes you because he loathed me. We were the same year at Hogwarts, and we never got on. I want you to promise me that you will not intentionally provoke him, Lydia," her dad advised, sounding quite stern.

"Why?" she asked curiously, bothered by the odd tone of his voice.

"This time I'm going to ask you to do as I say, Lydia, and no questions."

"But Dad!" she protested.

"Just promise to be on good behaviour in that class, Lu. He will make life harder for you because of who you are, and it's best to keep your head down. All right?"

"All right," she agreed glumly, hating when her parents left her out of things and refused to tell their secrets. She was still trying to forgive them for keeping the truth about Harry a secret, even though she understood their reasoning. She hated being the only child...they were far too overprotective.

"To answer your earlier question, Uncle Sirius is not coming to dinner with us tonight, but Remus said he would."

Lydia deflated even more at that. Her godfather was absolutely brilliant and she loved him dearly, even if he did give her boring books for every special occasion, but she also saw him every day at school. It was wonderful having him so nearby in case she needed anything or wanted to talk to her mum and dad (he always let her use the Floo in his office, even though he wasn't supposed to), but she hadn't seen Uncle Sirius once since school started. She had really hoped he would come tonight. "Why isn't he coming?" she pouted as her dad picked up her basket and took it to pay.

"I think he's having a hard time, Lulu," he sighed. He paid for her purchases, then led her back outside where her mum was waiting with a bag from Scrivenshaft's.

"If he's sad, shouldn't he come eat with us?" Lydia asked, hating the idea of Uncle Sirius alone in that horrible house of his. When she was younger, she'd been absolutely terrified of the place and held

onto one of the adults the whole time she was there. Now she knew there was nothing that could hurt her, but it was still gloomy and depressing. She once heard her mum muttering something about him living there as punishment, but she never really understood what for until her parents finally explained what happened to her brother.

The sadness that mostly melted away with the dawn of a new day suddenly returned full force as she imagined Uncle Sirius alone in his depressing house dwelling on his guilt.

"You know your Uncle Sirius, Lyddie Lu," her mum sighed. "Sometimes we have to let him brood."

Lydia nodded, but she still didn't feel so cheerful about wandering around in Hogsmeade with her parents. It had seemed a special privilege this morning when she was the only first year allowed out of the castle, but no doubt everyone knew why she got special treatment this weekend. "I planted an anemone with Hermione last night," she suddenly blurted.

"You planted a hermione with Anemone last night?" her dad teased.

"Daddy," she rolled her eyes.

But her mum was a little more perceptive. "An anemone?" she asked quietly and wrapped an arm around her, dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

"Mmhmm," she nodded. "Professor Sprout told me that sometimes people plant anemone for Adonis. In remembrance. And...and she said that it was a way to honour someone. I wanted to do something special because...because Harry never knew me, and sometimes I think I'd be a rotten sister because I-"

"Lydia," her dad stopped her abruptly, something flashing in his eyes as he gripped her shoulder tightly. "Why would you say something like that?"

"I don't know," she shrugged uncomfortably and stared down at her feet.

"I think you do," her mum countered gently.

"Well, it's just...sometimes I'm so angry at him!" she admitted. "And it isn't really his fault, so that hardly seems fair. But I used to be so mad because he always ruined Halloween, and now I'm mad because he isn't here! He would hate me," she said glumly.

Her dad dropped the Zonko's bag and knelt down in front of her, gripping her shoulders so hard it very nearly hurt her. His eyes were blazing, and she felt so horribly ashamed of herself, yet unable to stop the rush of foolish emotion. "You listen to me, Lydia Lucille," her dad ordered firmly. It was rare that her funny, easy-going father issued edicts like that, but when he did, Lydia knew to nod immediately and to keep her mouth shut. "You would not be a rotten sister. You can feel whatever you feel about Harry not being here. It wasn't his fault, but we have all been angry that he died. There's no shame in that. It doesn't make you a bad sister, it doesn't make me a bad father or your mum a bad mother. Harry would love you, just as we do. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, but-"

"No, Lydia," he shook his head. "I will not let you think like this."

"He saved the whole world and I'm mad at him for leaving!" she protested. "I'm selfish, and-"

"Lydia," her mum cut in, kneeling down to join them. "Last night you did something so special and sweet for a brother you never even met. You are a good, sweet girl. You are not selfish."

"It just isn't fair!" she started to cry in spite of herself. She had wanted to avoid this, hadn't wanted to worry her parents when she knew they were so sad. "Ginny has six brothers! And Briallen has a brother! And I know he did something special, but why did it have to be my brother?"

Her mum gathered her in a fierce hug and kissed the top of her head. "We've wondered that same thing for twelve years, Lulu," she whispered. "But there's no sense in it, Darling. It was Harry. It just was. He's gone, and I miss him every day, but I also know that he loved us, and he would love you, and he would want all of us to be as happy as we can be without him. Being the beautiful, wonderful girl you are is all you ever need to do for your brother. Remember

him, Love, keep him in your heart and honour him by living every day as fully as you can. I know he would be proud of you."

"Really?" she asked, sniffing a little as she once more imagined her brother, this time beaming at her with the same look of pride she sometimes saw in her dad's eyes, or her mum's, when they looked at her.

"Of course, Sweetheart," her dad confirmed. "Who wouldn't be proud of you?"

That brought new tears to her eyes, and she extricated herself from her mum's hug to throw her arms around her dad. As he hugged her, she thought of how wonderful they were and how lucky she was to have parents who loved her so, who kept her safe, who would do things like take her to Hogsmeade and listen to her and come see her at Halloween. It wasn't fair that Harry didn't get to grow up with them, to have all of these things, but she knew that he had been loved in his short life. He had Uncle Sirius, too, and she knew his godfather loved him as much as her godfather loved her. Harry's life was cut short, but it was full as long as it lasted. And perhaps that was enough. Perhaps wherever he was, Harry was happy and surrounded by the love of all the people who still remembered him, talked about him, cherished him. We miss you, Harry, she thought quietly, hoping he could hear her. I hope you're all right.

A/N: Not much to say this time, except as always, thanks to all the fabulous readers! I am so pleased by the response to this story and encouraged to keep it up! There's loads more story to go and I hope all of you will stick around! Happy New Year!

Chapter Five

Remus stayed with Sirius most of the day to watch over their young patient. While the Potters spent the day attempting to heal in Hogsmeade, their Harry was slowly healing on Sirius's sofa. It pierced Sirius's heart every time he thought of them attempting to move on with their lives while Harry was very much alive, but there was nothing for it. Not now, anyway. He could only sit with the boy, comfort him, reassure him, and try to get him well enough to see his parents soon.

Harry awoke a few times throughout the afternoon, but he was too feverish and weak for questions. A few murmured assurances were enough to calm his confusion, and they managed to coax him into swallowing the necessary potions and a bit of tea before he succumbed to exhaustion once more. He slept fitfully, plagued by unpleasant dreams that caused him to cry and thrash in his sleep. Sirius shared a few troubled looks with Remus as they both wondered, but refused to speak of the horrors the boy had probably known. Though the fever probably accounted for some of the restlessness, there was no doubt their little Harry had lived a troubled life without his family.

By evening, Remus had to return to Hogwarts to make an appearance with James, Lily, and Lydia to carry on the charade nothing had changed. After a long discussion, they both agreed James and Lily couldn't know until Sirius had explained to Harry first. It simply wasn't fair to thrust his long-lost parents upon him, not as sick as he had been. It was too much for him to cope with, especially since they doubted the boy knew he was a wizard.

When it became clear Harry would not rouse enough for dinner, Sirius gently picked him up and carried him up the stairs, keeping him close to his chest. It would be easier to levitate him, but on the off chance that the movement woke him, he didn't want to frighten the poor kid to death. Harry mumbled something as Sirius deposited him in the bed in his old bedroom, and then the boy sluggishly blinked and gazed up at his godfather. His eyes displayed more

lucidity than they had previously, but he was still warm and flushed with fever.

"Welcome back," Sirius smiled fondly.

Harry just blinked at him again and gazed around the room at his unfamiliar surroundings. He was too tired to be frightened now, too tired to protest the strange new environment.

"You're safe," Sirius promised him once more, just as he had every time Harry opened his eyes. "This is my old room. You were sleeping on the sofa, but I thought perhaps a real bed was in order for tonight."

"It's soft," Harry muttered.

"I should hope so," Sirius smiled. "Are you warm enough?"

"Mmm," Harry mumbled.

"Stay awake a bit longer, mate. You're still in those old clothes. I have something else for you if you stay awake."

The boy just nodded listlessly, so Sirius hurried to his own room and shrunk a few things closer to Harry's size. The boy was probably dazed enough not to notice the magic, but it was best not to take a chance until he was ready to explain everything.

"Up you go," Sirius encouraged as he lifted Harry slightly and helped him lean against the headboard. The large bed made him look even smaller, and the dark comforter made his pale skin stand out garrishly. Still, those green eyes looking back at him were one of the most lovely sights he'd ever seen. For now, Harry was too confused to question him, and he seemed to have abandoned all ideas of being able to fight. When he had a bit more energy, this would not be so easy. For the moment, however, it was almost like having that little infant back, that sweet little child who had trusted Sirius implicitly. "Want to do it yourself, mate, or you think you need some help?" he asked as he handed him the clothes. Harry didn't answer but held his arms up, and Sirius chuckled a little as he eased his godson out of the thin t-shirt.

Any joy Sirius was feeling at having the boy back vanished the instant his bare chest was revealed. Although Sirius had felt his ribs through his shirt the night before, he hadn't quite expected this. The kid was wasting away, his pale skin stretched eerily over his bones. Sirius could clearly count the protruding ribs, and his chest was covered in deep bruises that looked quite fresh and incredibly painful. A quick peek at his back revealed he was in no better state there, except instead of bruises, his skin was layered with criss-crossing scars. The damage here was older, the skin permanently disfigured with broad white stripes that nearly made Sirius gag. A few deep red lines intersected the other marks, and the effect was a mural of a child's suffering. He had his own fair share of scars, many from his own family, but his parents would never stoop to muggle methods. Harry's abuse had been slow, methodical, and entirely inflicted by hand. It was so much more personal than the quick wand waves that caused his own injuries, and the thought of someone beating Harry...

"Oh Merlin," he couldn't help breathing. "Who did this to you?"

Harry just stared up at him plaintively, his skin still flushed with fever and his eyes drooping with fatigue. Now was not the time for interrogation, but he was going to have his hands full when Harry was well enough to talk. Forcing down the outrage, Sirius swallowed hard and helped the boy dress in a pair of his shrunken down pyjamas. They were still a bit big on him, but they were better than the miserable scraps of clothing he'd worn earlier.

"There you go, mate," he managed to smile. "Much better, yeah?"

"Thank you, Sir," Harry whispered.

"It's Sirius," he corrected once more. "You can call me Sirius. Is there anything you'd like? A spot of dinner? You've not eaten all day."

"Water?" the boy asked hopefully.

"How about juice instead? You could use the sugar."

Harry nodded, and it was on the tip of Sirius's tongue to call for Kreacher before he remembered himself. He promised to return, then hurried downstairs and met the house-elf in the kitchen, where

he retrieved the potions and poured Harry a large glass of pumpkin juice.

"Master is still caring for the filthy muggle? Mistress would be so ashamed."

"Yes, well, Mistress is dead, Kreacher, and the muggle boy is no muggle. Insult him again, and it's clothes," he threatened harshly, instantly shutting the miserable thing up. He would never understand...Kreacher loathed him with a loyalty to Walburga Black that would be inspiring if not so demented, and yet the idea of being set free terrified him into submission. His mother had certainly done a number on the elf, and perhaps that was why Sirius had never been able to follow through on his nearly daily threats of clothes.

"As Master wishes," Kreacher bowed.

"Go clean something, Kreacher," Sirius sighed. "And do keep out of sight until I tell you otherwise. I don't want you frightening him. Come to think of it, don't go upstairs at all," he ordered. Kreacher bowed once more, then scurried away to his hiding place. Sirius shook his head and placed the items on a tray, carefully carrying them up to Harry. His godson was curled up beneath the blankets, utterly worn out from the effort of sitting up for only a few minutes. "Wake up just a bit, Kid," Sirius encouraged, once more lifting him by the arms. "Drink these and your juice, and you can go back to sleep."

"So tired," Harry moaned and resisted.

"I know. Just a few more moments."

Harry was so desperate for sleep, he quickly swallowed all of the potions without even asking what they were. He shuddered at the taste, and Sirius handed him the juice to wash it down. His eyes widened just a bit at the odd taste of the unfamiliar beverage, but he must have liked it and gulped down the whole glass without any prodding from Sirius.

"Well done," Sirius smiled and eased him back down. "Back to sleep, I think."

Harry nodded and slid beneath the covers, his eyes fluttering closed as sleep claimed him once more. Sirius dimmed the lights, then dared to run his fingers through the boy's hair and press a light kiss to his temple.

"Welcome home, Cub," he whispered. "You've been missed, little man."

Harry slept nearly sixteen hours after Sirius tucked him in. The exhaustion kept him asleep this time, and though Sirius checked on him almost hourly through the night and into the next day, his dreams did not seem to disturb him this time.

Sirius had just come to look in on him when the boy's eyes fluttered open for the first time since Saturday night. He was finally alert, and he bolted upright as his panicked

eyes surveyed the unfamiliar place. "Shh," Sirius hushed him quickly. "It's all right."

"Where am I?" Harry demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm Sirius," he answered calmly. "This is my house."

"I don't know you! What am I doing here?"

"You're safe," Sirius promised him once more, but it did nothing to soothe the frantic child.

"What did you do to me? Why am I here? What do you want?" Harry asked and started to scramble out of the bed. He was still weak from his ordeal and nearly fell over when his feet hit the floor, but he grasped for the blankets and kept himself upright, too panicked to care about anything except escape.

Sirius was suddenly glad he had spelled all the doors and windows shut last night in a moment of paranoia. He didn't want to sit next to the child all night, afraid he might frighten him, but he was also worried Harry would wake up and attempt to get out, just as he was doing now.

"You should sit," Sirius told him. "You've been through quite a lot. You must be feeling tired."

"Tell me what I'm doing here!"

Sirius wisely decided to back up, giving his godson space so he would not feel so threatened. He was quite certain he didn't want to know why Harry was so frightened, but he would give him whatever he needed to feel comfortable here.

"My name is Sirius," he reminded him once more. "Sirius Black. You're at my home in London. Do you recall anything that happened last night?"

Harry didn't answer, staring defiantly back at him. He was still holding tight to the blankets to keep himself standing, his knuckles turning white with the force of his grip, but his resolve did not waver. It seemed so very Potter, and yet it was heartbreaking. The poor boy could hardly stand, but he was clearly terrified what would happen to him if he did not.

"Nothing will happen to you here," Sirius promised. "You've no need to be afraid. I can tell you everything, but you ought to sit down. You've been very ill," he tried to coax the boy.

"I'm not sitting until you tell me who you are and what you want!" Harry shouted, then began to cough. His knees quaked and he gasped for breath, and it was all Sirius could do to hold himself back. He wanted to scoop the kid up and put him back in the bed where he belonged, but Harry seemed very near to breaking. From the scars and bruises he had uncovered last night, he suspected the touch of an adult was not soothing or comforting to Harry. It was something to be feared...not trusted.

"All right. I suppose that's fair," Sirius agreed when Harry managed to stop coughing. "I found you in Caledonian Park on Friday night. This is Sunday afternoon. You were very cold, and I brought you here to warm you up. Do you remember any of that?"

Harry was trembling with fear, but he slowly began to nod. "The cold. And the rain. And then someone...you?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes, Ha-" Sirius abruptly stopped himself, realising that he shouldn't know Harry's name. He didn't even know if the boy went by Harry, and it was best not to startle him too much when he was still very far

from earning the boy's trust. "You were very sick from the cold, and then you came down with a cough and fever yesterday. I've given you pot- medicine," he corrected quickly, "and you ought to feel better with some more rest and hot meals."

"I want to leave now," Harry announced, barely taking the time for his words to sink in.

"You aren't well yet," Sirius countered.

"You can't keep me here! You can't make me stay."

"You need to stay and recover," he tried again. "You could have died. It's far too cold for you to leave. You have no where to go, do you?"

Harry just stared back, refusing to answer. Sirius had to give the boy some credit; it was clear luck alone had not kept him alive the last twelve years. Sheer determination and steadfast refusal to relent had obviously done much to keep him going, but it was more than anyone could expect of a mere boy, and he deserved better than freezing park benches and near-starvation.

"You aren't a prisoner here," he told him carefully. "But I cannot allow you to leave."

The first flicker of fear lit Harry's eyes, and Sirius saw the tinge of desperation in his expression. "I won't tell anyone," Harry shook his head. "Just let me leave. I swear I won't tell."

He might as well have stabbed Sirius in the heart. The terrified pleas were gut-wrenching, and he knew his godson had been through hell. Someone had hurt the child, enough that he would rather live on the streets and brave the elements than be left here with a stranger. "It's freezing outside," he countered softly. "And still raining. You're ill. I'm not about to turn you back out into that weather."

"I don't have any money. I don't have anything to give you! Don't make me stay! Please!"

"I don't want money," Sirius shook his head, but that was the wrong thing to say. Harry just panicked even more, and Sirius wondered what else the boy had given to keep himself safe, fed, and warm in the last twelve years. "I don't want anything," he amended quickly. "I

only want you to stay here where you'll be warm. You can't go back outside to freeze to death. I promise I will never lay a hand on you. You'll be safe here," he vowed. "No one will harm you in this house."

Harry remained tucked close to the bed, afraid to move closer, but he looked as though he wanted to believe, wanted to trust. Seeing his opportunity, Sirius stepped closer.

"You can stay right in this room. I can make sure you have a proper meal three times a day. You'll have clothes and a place to stay. I know you have no reason to trust me, but I've kept you safe since Friday. Perhaps you could give me a few more days?"

Harry still looked nervous, but he finally nodded in consent.

"All right. How about something to eat and drink? Do you remember the last time you had a proper meal?"

Harry ducked his head and did not answer.

"I reckon hot soup would do you a world of good, then."

"I don't need anything, Sir," he shook his head. "I'm fine."

"You're sick and half-starved," Sirius countered. "Soup is no trouble. Rest here and I'll be right back," he promised, offering Harry a weak smile before retreating downstairs to the kitchen. He retrieved Kreacher from his little cupboard, quietly instructing him to prepare soup and tea. He was rubbish at preparing these things for himself, but her sternly advised Kreacher to stay in the kitchen and be as quiet as possible, then started towards the stairs.

His earlier instincts proved immensely helpful; Harry was at the door, anxiously tugging and attempting escape. He turned in fright when he heard the footsteps behind him, and Sirius took a deep breath as he tried to work out his next move. Harry couldn't be allowed to leave, that much was certain. There was no point letting him think otherwise, but he also didn't want to overly frighten the overly traumatised child, who undoubtedly suspected he would soon be harmed in this house where he was being held prisoner. It wouldn't be easy convincing him it was for his own good. He was so jumpy and nervous, it was quite clear he didn't trust a soul in this world to protect him, much less a complete stranger.

"It won't open," he informed him plainly.

"What are you doing? Why are you keeping me here?"

"Because you'll catch your death outside," he answered simply. "I only want to help you."

"Then why am I locked in here?" Harry demanded.

"I know you're frightened. You've no reason to trust me, and I reckon you have about twelve years of bad experiences telling you not to trust anyone, even if they claim to want to help," Sirius reasoned. "But I'm not about to let you freeze or starve, so I'm afraid I have to lock you in for now. As soon as I'm sure you aren't going to harm yourself, you can come and go as you like."

Harry continued fighting with the door, and Sirius let him. There was no way that door was going to open, and fairly soon, the boy would wear himself out. He put up a noble effort, but after a few solid moments, he grew too tired to keep it up and slid down the door, dropping his head into his hands and shaking all over.

It took supreme will and self-restraint Sirius didn't know he possessed to leave Harry sitting there. His first instinct was to go to him, to wrap him up and hold him close and promise nothing bad would ever happen to him again. But the boy was terrified of him, and any promises he made would be empty right now. The best thing he could do was show him he meant him no harm, and hopefully eventually Harry would begin to trust.

Until then, he could only wait. He returned to the kitchen and watched Kreacher finish up the soup, admonishing the elf to return to his cupboard and stay there while Sirius took the food to Harry. The boy was still sitting by the door, head in his hands as he wept quietly. Sirius set the tray on a small table by the sofa, then watched carefully for a moment as his godson stubbornly refused to look up.

"Come and eat," Sirius instructed.

Harry said nothing.

"You will only hurt yourself by refusing to eat. The doors and windows will not open. Come now," he tried again.

The routine played out for another half an hour before Harry finally relented and sat down on the sofa, eyeing the soup cautiously. His body was rigid and prepared for flight at any moment, but he reluctantly reached out and took the bowl of steaming soup. Sirius had cast quiet warming spells every so often to keep it hot, but Harry had not noticed anything amiss. No doubt the sealed doors and windows were troubling him more than soup that ought not be warm after his thirty minute show of stubborn refusal.

Spoon in hand, Harry ate as nervously as he sat and moved. He would take a spoonful, then look to Sirius as though he feared he had done something wrong. It was overwhelming how scarred the boy must be, and it seemed impossible that this damaged child was Harry Potter, a boy who had been so loved and so pampered. At fifteen months old, he owned more toys than many children saw in a lifetime. At thirteen, he owned torn jeans, a thin t-shirt, and trainers with a worn out sole.

"Is it all right?" Sirius asked as Harry took another little sip of his soup.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir," he answered automatically. Sirius swallowed down a

wave of anger as he wondered how many of the scars were inflicted in teaching him that particular lesson. That was a response born of fear, so deeply ingrained that Sirius knew it was taught with pain. How many times had he answered his own parents so automatically, the words coming before he could stop them? He learned early and often to say the right things, lest the wand be turned on him. Later he began to ignore the rules...or cleverly evade them, but as a young child, he could list potions ingredients, name famous Pureblood wizards, and follow all the rules of civilised society without even thinking.

"I am not, nor will I ever be, a Sir," Sirius corrected him softly. "You can call me by my name."

Harry swallowed hard, but nodded obediently. He was a confusing mix of frightened child and grown adult, all at once. For the first time, Sirius realised perhaps it was good fortune that brought Harry to him rather than James and Lily or even Remus. None of them understood as well as he did. None of them would comprehend the odd combination of abused child, who never developed quite right, and capable, independent adult. His friends had loved his childishness at Hogwarts and thought him great fun. It was only years later, after the disastrous prank, that James began to piece it together, to realise the immaturity was not simply a fun-loving personality, but a defect borne of too many strikes from the people meant to protect him. The child was stunted, stuck, suspended in time. And all the while, that terrified child also took on the persona of an adult, capable of keeping himself from harm's way because no one else would.

Harry was clearly abused young. He learned early in his life no one would take care of him. He never grew up, never experienced the stages of childhood, but he'd been living on his own for Merlin knew how long, providing himself with food, shelter, and clothing to get by. And it broke Sirius's heart. There had been no choice for him. He was a Black, and he knew his place in this world. He'd been fortunate to find the Potters, and Remus and Lily, to find a new family who cared for him and helped him through the scars inflicted by his parents. But Harry was different. Harry was born to parents who would have died for him, parents who would have sooner cut their own throats than hurt their child. The sun and moon and stars revolved around Harry, and yet he'd grown up never knowing how truly loved he was, how very much he was worth. He was timid and frightened, sure he could not trust the hand feeding him now, waiting for the other shoe to drop and for Sirius to hurt him.

But he never would. And he would make certain no one else did, either. It may be a long, slow process earning the boy's trust, but he could do it, he decided. And soon Harry would be ready for the truth, and he would be all right. Thirteen wasn't too late. There was still a glimmer of light in his eyes; he wasn't completely gone.

"Will you tell me your name?" he asked when Harry finished the soup and most of his juice.

Harry swallowed and cast another longing look to the door, but clearly realised it was futile. "H-Harry," he admitted.

Sirius was rather surprised the boy knew that, and wondered how it was that a fifteen-month old child could have learned his proper name.

"That's what I go by," Harry added after a long moment. "I don't know if it's my name."

"I see," Sirius nodded. "Have you always been called Harry?"

The boy shook his head sadly. "I don't...I don't really have a name."

"I think Harry is a fine name," Sirius told him meaningfully. "It suits you."

"Can I go now?" Harry asked him.

"No, Harry. It's too cold outside. Why do you want to leave? Where would you go?"

"I...I have a place to go," he lied uselessly.

"Come now, we both know that isn't true, don't we?"

"You can't touch me. I won't let you."

"Harry," he breathed, shaking his head in despair. "I have no intentions of hurting you. You are perfectly safe here."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you just keep me here?"

"Because you're a boy. Boys should have a place to live and someone to take care of them."

Harry just dropped his head. "I do fine," he said stubbornly.

"You nearly died a few days ago."

Harry said nothing in response and kept his gaze fixed on the floor. Sirius was desperate for more answers, desperate to find out where the boy had been all this time and who had hurt him, but he knew he had to move slowly. Harry finally spoke a few words to him, told him his name and gave a few clues about his past. It was enough for now, and he was clearly exhausted and worn out.

"You ought to get some more rest. You can take a hot shower if you like, or just go to bed."

Harry still said nothing.

"The washroom is next to your room. Make yourself at home, Harry. There are fresh towels there. There are clothes in the bureau for you."

When Harry still didn't make a move, Sirius decided to leave him be. Perhaps if he realised he would be left alone, he would start to feel a little more comfortable. He told the boy he would be in his own room, then retreated upstairs and left Harry alone on the sofa.

It was nearly an hour later before Sirius heard his godson's footsteps coming up the stairs. They were slow and hesitant, but he eventually made his way to the bathroom. A few minutes later, Sirius heard the water turning on and smiled slightly to himself. Small steps, he decided. Small steps towards convincing Harry he was safe, and perhaps soon, he would start to believe it.

A/N: I am so thankful to all the wonderful readers out there and so encouraged by your reviews! Thank you so much! I have debated whether to turn off anonymous reviews since there has been some abuse, but I have decided to leave it on...Lord knows I'm too lazy to login half the time, and I don't want to discourage anyone from sharing their thoughts! But if you flame, I will delete it. I hope my readers will let me know if something is ringing false...I have tried for realism and certainly do not always succeed!

WARNING: Mentions of child abuse in this chapter

EDITED TO ADD: This chapter may leave a few things hanging. You may have questions. I PROMISE it will all make sense. Everything that doesn't quite work at the moment will work later on. There is an explanation, so hang in there! :)

Chapter Six

The man, called Sirius, seemed like he might be the nicest man in the world. His house was odd, but the man obviously had a lot of money. He had nice things, even if they were a bit old. The bathroom was huge, with an ornate bathtub and elaborate shower, and a huge mirror with an intricate frame. It had been ages since he had a decent shower, and though he felt vaguely guilty about doing so now, Sirius had told him he was allowed. The man had stayed away for nearly thirty minutes, and Harry finally decided it might be safe to risk a shower. He was desperate for one, and the hot water was too tempting in the end.

There was no lock on the door, which made him nervous. He swallowed down his fear and stripped out of his clothes, noticing, perhaps for the first time, they were not his own. They were far too comfortable – and clean – to be his. He vaguely remembered Sirius helping him into them the night before, but he could not recall being hurt. There were no new marks in the mirror, either.

Feeling a bit more secure, he stepped into the shower and revelled in the feeling of hot water washing off the dirt and grime. Normally he could shower at the shelter and be on his way, but he hadn't dared, not this week. When the weather grew cold, he went there hoping for a warm place to sleep and a few decent meals, but Brian had been there this week, and his little gang. They all hated Harry, knew him for the freak he was. He avoided them at all costs, and

when they caught him sneaking in for a shower last week, they made him sorry. He thought about finding someplace else, but it was too cold to go far, and he was always wary of leaving a relatively safe place. Friday he had given in and decided he had to move. Though he had found a decent place to sleep in an abandoned warehouse, it was cold now, and he needed somewhere warm to sleep at night. The warehouse kept him out of the rain, but if he froze to death, it wouldn't matter if he was dry. He needed somewhere warm, a place where no one knew him for the freak he was. He met Brian and his gang last year and formed an uneasy alliance with the older boys, but as always, they discovered his strangeness and turned on him. He would have to seek a new area, find a new shelter. He was starting to get sick, felt the tightening of his chest urging him to find warmth. It would only grow worse if he stayed out much longer.

But moving around was hard. If he carried too much with him, people grew suspicious. He couldn't risk people paying too much attention and asking too many questions. Even the shelters could be dangerous if someone decided to take interest in why a young boy was on his own. His lies only carried him so far. People only bought it for so long. When he decided it was time to go, he hid his small backpack and decided to come back for it later.

He was sicker than he thought. He tired easily, and his sweatshirt had been stolen at the shelter last week. The rain was freezing on his bare arms, and he had finally grown too exhausted to keep going. The rain on his glasses made it hard to see anyway, and so he curled up on the park bench and hoped he'd live through the night.

Waking up in a place like this was a small miracle, but Harry didn't believe in miracles. He stopped believing in them long ago. He stopped wishing for kind strangers when he learned most strangers would hurt you rather than help you. Sirius might seem nice now, but eventually, Harry would pay the price of staying in a place like this, using the hot water, eating the warm food.

As the hot water soothed his aching limbs, he decided perhaps the price he paid would be worth it for a shower, a warm bed, and food. Sirius didn't seem so bad. Perhaps he wouldn't be too awful. And Harry wasn't naïve enough to think this arrangement would last. Sirius was discover his freakishness and send him off, just like all the others. For now, it bought him time to stay here. He could

recover from illness and the cold, eat a few decent meals, and then be on his way. If he was hurt in the process...well, he'd been through worse, hadn't he? The scars on his back were testament to that.

He was exhausted after his shower and dressed in the new pyjamas he found in the bureau, just as Sirius told him. The man still hadn't come for him, so he climbed into the bed thinking he might actually be able to sleep without being bothered. Sirius had let him sleep quite a long time while he recovered, and most adults called him lazy and made him get up to do work instead of letting him have a lie in, even when he was feeling sick. He dozed off with his head resting on the softest pillow beneath the warmest blankets he had ever felt, wondering what kind of strange place this was to be lit with candles instead of normal lights.

When he woke, he laid in the bed for a while and stared up at the ceiling as he contemplated his new situation. There was something odd happening here, something he couldn't quite figure out about the place. He had turned the lock on the front door in every direction, but the door still wouldn't open. And Sirius told him it would be the same with the windows. How was it the door was still locked? How could he so thoroughly seal Harry in? And why would he want to? He'd had every opportunity now to hurt Harry, yet he'd left him alone, fed him, allowed him to shower, and given him clean, warm clothes.

He could try to run. He could try to work a way out of the house. But he hadn't felt so comfortable in a very long time, and though he was terrified of the strange man, being here was being better than the warehouse...or a park bench. For the time being, he had hot water, a bed to sleep in, and a roof over his head. Even if he escaped, where would he go? He was safest here...at least for now.

Mind made up, he thought hard about what he ought to do. He couldn't explain why the man was taking care of him, but he needed it to continue as long as possible. That meant he needed to try his best not to do anything strange. He needed to be good, and polite, and stay out of the way. Then maybe he would avoid angering Sirius, and perhaps he would be able to stay here a while, postpone his inevitable return to the cold, unforgiving streets.

Gathering up his courage, he wandered down the stairs and found Sirius seated on the sofa with a book. He quickly put it aside and smiled at Harry. "Nice kip?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," he answered politely.

Sirius frowned, as though something made him unhappy, but then he shrugged and gestured towards the other room. "You've slept through to dinner time. Are you hungry?"

Harry wondered frantically if this was a trick question. Sometimes it was, but it was so hard to tell! Sirius seemed sincere, so after a long moment, he nodded.

"Dinner, then."

Sirius led him into a kitchen with a huge wooden table already set with silverware and large bowls. There was something steaming on the stove, and Harry wondered if Sirius had fixed this himself. He waited to be invited, then sat down at the table where Sirius indicated.

"Relax, Harry," the man instructed in a kind voice. "Nothing to be frightened of. I have a great many things to explain to you, but the first thing you must know is that you are safe here. You will never be harmed in this house."

Harry wanted very much to believe him, but he knew better. Even the people who said that didn't mean it, not really. When they saw his freakishness, they all wanted him gone. Even the ones who hadn't hurt him sent him away, back to the hunger and the cold and the scraps and the begging. This man would, too. He may have been kind to him and cared for him as most people never would, but that didn't mean he could be trusted. Not forever, anyway.

On the other hand, food was a luxury he never took for granted. So long as it wasn't tainted, he should eat it. If he was on the street again tomorrow, a full belly today would help. The bad weather had kept people indoors lately, and he hadn't had much to eat in weeks. He felt it in his bones, in the fatigue that made it hard to think or move, in the dizzy weightlessness of his head. If the man was offering him a meal, he was a fool not to take it.

He forced himself to relax and watched Sirius dish out the stew. Harry again waited for his host to be seated and to pick up his spoon before doing the same, and then he took a cautious bite of the steaming stew. It was so hot and delicious he wanted to cry. He couldn't remember the last time he ate anything that tasted so good, and after a moment, the fear was replaced with desperation to eat as much as he could. This would not last forever, and soon he would be back to the measley portions of stale food he normally ate.

He realised belatedly he was eating too quickly for his stomach to adapt, and tears of anger and frustration filled his eyes as queasiness rushed over him. He was weak and pathetic, and he was ruining what might be his last chance at a decent meal.

"Slow down, mate," Sirius instructed. "You don't want to make yourself sick up."

He looked hesitantly at the bowl, worried it would be taken from him but knowing he needed to stop or slow down. He slowly lowered his spoon to the table again and stared longingly at the delicious stuff, willing himself not to cry like a baby.

"That isn't going anywhere," Sirius assured him quietly. "And you can have more whenever you want."

"It's very good, Sir," he remembered to say.

"Oy, enough with the 'Sir.' It's Sirius," the man corrected once more. "Would you like more juice?"

This all seemed like a very cruel trick, but Harry forced himself to nod anyway. The juice the man kept giving him was an odd flavour and nothing he had ever tasted before, but it was sweet and delicious and felt amazing on his raw throat. He watched as Sirius poured a full glass, then gratefully accepted it and savoured the taste.

"Pumpkin juice," Sirius explained. "You've probably never had it before."

"No, Sir. Sirius," he corrected himself quickly, earning a quick grin from the man.

"Drink up, then eat a bit more if you can."

His stomach was feeling better after the juice, so he picked up his spoon again and tried to discipline himself to eat a little slower this time. He managed to finish the bowl, then without asking, Sirius filled it up a bit more and offered it to him. Harry hesitated, wanting more but afraid he would get a smack for taking it. Mr. Parker had done that often. Things offered were not always meant to be taken, and Harry had never become good at guessing when he ought to say yes and when he ought to politely refuse. It seemed he always picked the wrong answer.

But Sirius hadn't hit him yet. He hadn't even threatened or raised a hand, so perhaps it would be all right. He took another bite of stew, and to his great relief, Sirius only drank more tea and seemed entirely unconcerned with Harry wasting his food.

When Harry had finished, Sirius picked up the bowl and carried it to the sink. Harry was sure he was in for it; he was never supposed to let other people do the cleaning up, but when Sirius turned back around, he only smiled. "Do you feel up to talking now?" he asked. "We can go to the sitting room."

"All right," he nodded reluctantly and followed the man out to the sofa. Sirius patted one end of it, inviting him to sit, and Harry cautiously followed his directions.

"I understand you may not trust me," Sirius began, "but do you think you could tell me just a few things?"

"I-I guess," he answered uncomfortably. "Will you send me back?"

"Send you back where?" Sirius frowned.

Harry only shrugged, not wanting to tell him about the last foster family who took him in just in case Sirius decided to make him someone else's problem.

"I've no intentions of sending you anywhere, Harry. I certainly won't be sending you to live on your own. Is that what you've been doing?"

Harry's stomach clenched as he looked away. If he told, the man might call the police. People often did when they found out Harry

didn't have a home, and the police would only send him to another family. He couldn't let that happen again. Living alone was far safer, even if he didn't always have food or a warm place to sleep.

"You were sleeping on a park bench, mate. In the rain and the cold. You don't have to answer me if you really don't want to. I know you're by yourself."

"Are you going to tell?" he asked quietly.

"Who would I tell?"

"The police."

"The who...oh. Oh, I see," Sirius seemed to figure it out.

"I'll get in trouble if you do."

Sirius seemed to find something oddly funny about that, but he quickly grew sober again and shook his head. "I'm not going to tell the police," he promised. "Can we make a deal, Harry? I won't tell anyone the things you tell me if you only answer my questions. And you have to stay here with me. No trying to run off."

Harry swallowed hard, knowing that was a dangerous promise to make. What if he had to run off? What if the man was only pretending to be nice? He really might change his mind about all this when Harry inevitably did something strange.

"All right, Harry," the man sighed after a moment. "The first part, then? I won't tell if you answer my questions?"

"O-okay," he agreed uncertainly.

Sirius smiled encouragingly, and Harry decided that the man looked nice when he smiled, and maybe he really wasn't going to hurt him. "Will you tell me how long you've lived on your own?"

He never thought he would escape from there. He had laid awake so many nights dreaming of it, dreaming of someone coming and rescuing him, telling him he was loved and cared for, that he belonged in a real home with a real family, not with these mean, terrible people. When it became clear no one was coming for him,

he started to steal. Just a little bit, just fifty pence here and there, a pound or two if he was lucky. He hid it in his ratty shoes, and later, when the sole had fallen out, he hid it beneath a floorboard in the tiny closet designated as his room.

Stealing was wrong, and he knew it. But if no one wanted him, he would have to take care of himself. He didn't know where he would go or what he would do, but he wasn't stupid. He knew how much things cost; Shannon sent him to the store sometimes to bring home food, and it was always important to bring home all the change and to tell her precisely what it all cost, or she might accuse him of stealing. She didn't know he was swiping coins from her purse, and Adam was determined that she never would.

The last time Eric laid a hand on him was the very worst. They were not the first family to hit him, but Eric's discipline left him bruised and tender for days. His back still ached from the last time when Eric yanked him out of the closet, and Adam instinctively shut his eyes the moment he saw the aluminum bat in his foster's father hands.

He knew why it was happening. He hadn't meant to do it. He really hadn't. The kids at school were chasing him and picking on him, and he had closed his eyes and disappeared. The next thing he knew, the teachers were yelling at him and someone was climbing up on the roof to fetch him. He knew he would be in terrible trouble, and as Eric grabbed him, he wished he had run, even though the little pouch beneath the floorboards wasn't nearly full enough. Anything would be better than this...

He woke again to light spilling in beneath the crack in the closet door and a mouth that tasted as though it was filled with cotton. His eyes were swollen, and he knew he must have cried while he was being hit. It hurt to move, it hurt to think, and so he just laid still in his closet, hoping and praying Eric would not come back.

For days he just laid there, sitting up only the few times Shannon shoved in little bits of food or a glass of water. She yanked him out a few times a day to use the loo, and in between, he dozed with his head on the floor and trembled with chills as fever burned and raged. Eric had not returned, and he had not heard the man's deep, angry voice since the beating. The very first night that the fever subsided, when he was still feeling so very tired and unpleasantly sore, he

searched for his tiny coin pouch beneath the floor boards and stuck it in his trouser pockets.

That night, when the telly stopped blaring and the house grew silent, he limped to the dresser where they kept his meager belongings and pulled on a clean t-shirt and a hooded jumper. His back began to bleed when he ripped off the t-shirt, but he stifled his cried and reminded himself that freedom was just beyond the door.

As soon as he escaped the Parker's, he ran as far and as long as his body let him. Long after his lungs began to ache from exertion, he continued to run until he was sure they would never follow him. He was so overcome with joy, so elated by his freedom, that he thought it a great adventure to sleep beneath the stars that night, the cool breeze calming his racing heart. It would be all right now. No one ever took care of him, and now, no one would hurt him, either.

Three days later, the money was gone and he was tired and cold and hungry. People kept looking at him funny, as though they knew his secret, and he knew if anyone found out that he had run away, they would send him back to the Parkers. He felt quite certain he would not survive a second encounter with Eric, so he made it his mission not to be seen when someone might suspect. During the day, when children ought to be at school, he slept wherever he could find shelter. In the afternoon, he scraped up money however he could, sometimes pretending to be a neighbourhood boy trying to save up a bit of extra money, or sometimes just stealing.

His hand slipped in the wrong pocket one afternoon, startling an older boy. The boy whirled around and caught Adam's wrist in his, a look of sheer fury crossing his face. Adam instinctively cowered and raised his other hand to guard his face, expecting the blow immediately. He was surprised instead when the older boy dropped his hand abruptly. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

Adam said nothing. He couldn't admit the truth, but he had no lie to excuse himself.

"Trying to steal from me?" the boy asked again. "Well?"

Adam was so hungry he couldn't even think straight. It hadn't been a good week this week, and it was starting to get colder. He used his money to buy a hot chocolate yesterday, a poor investment that did

little for his growling tummy but warmed him for a brief time. "I'm hungry," he admitted miserably, hoping the boy would have pity on him. He probably wasn't old enough to tell on Adam, but maybe he would just let him go.

The older boy sighed loudly and crouched down to be closer to Adam's level. "When was the last time you ate?" the boy asked, much to his surprise.

"I dunno," Adam shrugged. "Couple of days."

And that was that. The boy – Liam, as he later introduced himself – had taken him home after that. Home was a rather tatty flat nearby, but there were several beds and heat and, most amazingly, there was a kitchen stocked with food. That night, Adam was placed at the table with Liam's little sister, Sara, and three other kids. All together, there were three other boys and two girls, all older than Adam, except for Sara, who was nine. They fed him a proper meal that night, gathered up some spare blankets and an extra pillow, and let him sleep on the floor in a room with the other two boys, Ryan and Ben.

The little flat became the first real home Adam had ever known. The others took care of him, and he did what he could to help out. He was small and cute and often earned sympathy from adults, so when Liam took him out and taught him how to ask for money, it was an instant success. He brought home enough to earn him his own little bed in the room with Ryan and Ben, and he went to sleep every night with his stomach full.

But the strange things kept happening. Liam was the first to notice it after he insisted that Abby give him a haircut. Adam hated how short it was, and he woke the next day, it was the same length it had always been. Liam kept a closer eye on him after that, and the whispers started.

Soon after the hair debacle, Sara walked into the room and startled him. He cried out in alarm, and simultaneously, the window broke. Sara had cried for nearly an hour, and Adam begged her not to tell the others. They lied that night and said they found it that way, but Sara refused to sit by him anymore.

Over the summer, things went from bad to worse. It was so hot this summer, and Liam had promised he would take Adam and Sara to the park for some fresh air today. He woke up excited and started to get dressed when he heard something odd. Something was tapping on the window to their room. Ryan and Ben were already gone for the day for their jobs at the grocer's, and so Adam walked over to the window and found a large owl sitting there, tapping its beak against the glass. Confused, he opened the window a bit to shush it away. As it took flight, Adam noticed that it had left something behind.

Harry Potter

The Blue Bed By the Wall,

250 Coldharbour Lane, #7

Brixton,

London

Adam's hands shook as he picked up the odd envelope. His best was the only blue one in the room, and his bed was also situated right next to the wall. He had no idea who Harry Potter was, but it was an odd sort of thing to happen...and odd sorts of things were always happening to him.

He was debating how to destroy the thing when Liam walked in. "Morning, Adam," he greeted brightly, then noticed the letter. "What do you have there?"

"Nothing!" he answered quickly.

"Let's see it then," Liam ordered.

All the kids always listened to Liam. He was oldest, paid the most, and took care of them all. He had taken his little sister away from their foster parents, and along the way, he picked up a few other strays, all of them abandoned by their parents or runaways from bad foster families, like Adam. They all helped, but Liam was in charge.

Hands shaking, Adam handed it over.

"Harry Potter," Liam read. "Who is Harry Potter?"

"I-I-I d-d-don't know."

He hardly ever stuttered these days, and he was embarrassed he had done it now. It had started when he was five, when he first left the children's home after it was shut down. His first foster family instilled fear so deeply that by the time he left, he could barely speak. But he was doing better now, and he hated himself for showing his weakness in front of Liam.

"All right, little guy," Liam smiled kindly. He was always calling Adam that, and he liked it. It made him feel safe. He knew it was because he was smaller than all the others, and the youngest of the boys, but it was the first thing anyone had called him that sounded so nice. "Nothing to worry about," Liam added reassuringly. "Let's toss it in the rubbish bin, right?"

Adam nodded immediately, but he watched as Liam left the room with the letter. And Liam never tossed it away. He returned to his own room, and a few minutes later, Sara emerged from hers and the three of them went to the park.

The next day, Ryan and Ben were home from work when the owl came. "What's that?" Ben asked and hurried over to the window. Adam felt ill, but he had no time to stop Ben before the other boy discovered the strange letter. "The blue bed by the wall?" he asked curiously. "Adam, what is this? How did you..."

"I didn't," he protested quietly. "I swear I didn't."

But it kept happening. Again and again. And finally on the fourth day, there were so many owls at the window that the letters were getting dropped inside, and they were starting to pile up. They all said Harry Potter, and they were all addressed to his bed. "Open it," Liam demanded sternly that night when he returned home to find Adam crying quietly on the sofa, the others staring at him suspiciously. He forced the others from the room and sat next to Adam.

"Liam," he said quietly, hoping the other boy would say or do something to make this better. Liam had protected him since he was a starving boy on the street. Liam had given him the first place he

ever considered home. And even though Liam's eyes had been darkening towards him lately, he had never looked like this. Not ever.

"Open it."

Adam did, unfolding the strange bit of paper to reveal a letter.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on Spetember 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.

Yours sincerely,

Minvera McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

"It's not real! I don't know what it is! I didn't do it!" Adam cried immediately, attempting damage control before Liam could even react.

"You better go to your room, Adam," Liam sighed.

Adam couldn't help tossing a longing look towards the dinner that Sara was preparing on the stove. Even here, where his meals were guaranteed and certain, he was always anxious.

"You'll have dinner, little guy," Liam promised, his tone softening a little as he saw the look on his face. "I'll bring it, yeah?"

Adam knew better than to protest. He nodded quickly and scurried into his room, tossing himself onto the cursed bed and biting his lip hard to keep from crying.

The owls quit coming after that, but everything was different. That night, Ben and Ryan didn't sleep in their room. The next morning, Adam heard shouting from the other room. He eyed the rickety

wardrobe at the end of his bed, wondering if they would let him take the clothes he bought with his share of the meagre income.

In the end, it was two days of meals in his room and covert glances before Liam called him into his room. "Adam, I need to talk to you," he announced seriously.

Adam nodded without even looking up, suddenly wondering if he was really Adam at all. He liked the idea of having a name – a real name – but since the letter was delivered and finally opened, he'd had nothing but pain. If this was what came with a last name, he'd gladly give the name back and stay Adam forever.

He wasn't stupid, after all. He knew Liam had nothing good to tell him, not with that look on his face. And somehow he didn't think the name was going to help him when he was hungry and homeless once more.

"There's no easy way to say this, mate," Liam sighed heavily as they settled on his bed. "The others...we've been talking."

Adam wanted to cry, but he knew better. Crying never got anyone anywhere. Crying would not stop Liam from what he was about to do.

"Guess I should call you Harry, right?" Liam tried to smile. "Harry Potter. It's a good name."

"I'm not him," he shook his head. "I swear, Liam! It's a mistake! A joke! I didn't mean anything! Please don't make me go away," he pleaded.

"We can't have odd things like this, mate. You know what would happen to all of us if we were found out. Someone knows how to find you and they really want to, yeah?"

"It's not me," Adam shook his head plaintively. "I'm Adam. Just Adam."

"Maybe you aren't. That's just what they called you. Maybe it's a good thing, buddy. Maybe you've got a family somewhere. I bet you could find out, now that you know your real name."

"I don't want to find out," he protested. "No one wants me! No one ever looked for me before! Please, Liam, it won't happen anymore," he promised. "Just let me stay."

"I really wish I could, but you know I've got to look out for Sara. I can't take care of her on my own. And everyone's afraid, mate. We've seen what you do sometimes, and now this owl, and the letter, and...it's too much," Liam admitted. "We've all got to look out for each other, and you're too dangerous. If someone finds us here, they'll send us all back where we came from. I can't let that happen. I'm really sorry, mate. If I could fix it, I would, but you just can't stay."

Adam forced himself to nod and fought back the bitter tears of rejection and hopelessness. Coming to live with Liam and Sara and all the others had saved him from the hunger and the fear. He had a real bed, no one hurt him, there was always a bit of food for him, and there were people who didn't hate him and would talk to him. But once again, his strangeness took them away from him. Now they hated him, too, just like the teachers at the children's home, or the foster parents who never kept him long. "Where am I going to go?" he asked quietly.

"Maybe the Parkers will take you back," Liam suggested, trying to sound cheerful. But the thought made Adam's stomach hurt. He had run away from the Parkers after the last time...that was when he found Liam, and though he hadn't told Liam everything, the older boy knew enough to take him in, knew enough to realise he couldn't go back there. "Look, I know they were bastards, Adam, but sometimes...sometimes we've just got to do it, yeah?"

Adam nodded, but he knew he wasn't going back there. Not ever. He would stay on the streets before he'd go back to the Parkers.

"Maybe you can find a family member. There's loads of Potters. Someone's gotta be yours. You'll find them," Liam said confidently. "I've got some money, and some clothes for you. It'll get you back to the Parkers, and then you'll find some family and be just fine, mate. All right?"

It wasn't all right. It was never going to be all right. This was the longest he'd stayed in one place since he was five years old, and now they didn't want him, either. He couldn't help these things that he did, and it frightened everyone away. What was the point in trying

to find a place to stay if everyone hated him in the end? He was forever being thrown out, tossed out the door, expected to move on to the next place, and then the next. No one stuck around, no one bothered to make sure he had plenty to eat or warm clothes to wear. Sometimes teachers at schools he sporadically attended tried to check up on him, but a few weeks later, he was always gone. And now he truly had nowhere to go once more. His stomach pitched again when he thought of the aching hunger he felt the last time he was on his own, the overwhelming fear as he tried to find a safe place to sleep each night. He didn't want to go back to that, not again, but what choice did he have?

"Stay and eat some dinner, yeah?" Liam asked him, an edge of concern in his voice. And Adam knew why. Liam could pretend he was going to be fine, that he would go back to the Parkers and be taken care of, but he knew better. Liam knew the next meal might be days away. Liam knew there was no place to sleep tonight. They would feed him dinner so he wouldn't be alone and starving tonight, but what about a few days from now when the money dried up? What good was a bloody last name going to do him when he had no food and no shelter?

Despite his best efforts, fat tears welled up in his eyes and started to stream down his cheeks. He wanted to promise he would never do any freakish things again, but he knew he couldn't promise that. He'd promised the Parkers, after all, and the Stones, and the Hendersons, but it was always the same. He tried and tried to be normal, but then something would happen. He'd end up on the roof, or something would smash, or he'd dodge a punch by flying across the room. One time he was hungry and food just flew out of the kitchen cupboard, and he'd been out on the doorstep before he could even eat it. Now the stupid bloody owl revealed him for what he was, a no good worthless freak, and he was once more alone.

Liam wrapped an arm around him and ruffled his hair. "You're strong, Kid. You'll be fine," he promised.

But he was lying. Nothing was ever going to be fine again.

A/N part 2: Yes...I know this raises as many questions as it answers, such as...why did no one come looking for Harry? All questions will be answered :)

A/N: Thank you everyone for being patient through a difficult chapter! And thank you for being patient waiting for the answer. So, I'd like to address the owl thing first. I have long refused to believe McGonagall and/or Dumbledore knew Harry lived in a cupboard, and this has been the answer in my mind for a long time. It may not be canon, but conveniently, this is an AU story! I know everyone is anxiously awaiting the reunion with James and Lily, and I promise it's coming in the near future!

Chapter 7

Sirius had never felt so sick in his life. Not when he learned what nearly happened to Moony he night Sirius sent Snape to the Willow, not when he realised Peter had betrayed them, not even when he watched his friends screaming for their baby inside the ruins of a burned house.

Of all the things to condemn Harry, all the things to sentence him to a life of begging on the streets...his Hogwarts letter. Even worse, they had come so close to learning the truth. Harry's name was on that list. It had never been erased, as they assumed. His name was on the list, and through oversight and mistake, they had lost him again. His letter should have brought him home, and instead, it put him on the street with no food, no place to live, no clothing and nothing to eat.

The thought of Harry's name – the proof of his life – so close to them made him want to scream and rage and destroy everything in the house. It wouldn't have erased his suffering; by eleven, Harry was more damaged than a child had any right to be. But his life had gotten so much worse because of that letter, and he was deprived of the real joy any wizarding child ought to feel upon receiving the Hogwarts acceptance.

So close. So very close. Sirius's mind reeled as he frantically puzzled it out, trying to understand why no one had ever known. They had all assumed his name disappeared when he died, but the quill reflected reality, not belief. The quill would have known Harry was alive, and the day the house in Godric's Hollow burned to the ground, they could have checked the Hogwarts list and seen the name, still there, still just waiting for the boy to turn eleven.

But no one bothered. Why bother, when they were so sure?

The next ten years followed in the same pattern of ignorance and mistaken belief. While they mourned and grieved, the proof of Harry's existence was sitting locked up in a records book just waiting for someone to come along and discover it. Except no one ever came. There were so many magical children waiting for letters that the magic had been established long, long ago to make the process quick and efficient. A list of Muggleborn children was generated and thoroughly checked, and then Minerva McGonagall went and visited each home. Harry was no Muggleborn, and so his name appeared on an entirely different list, a much longer list of children who ought to know Hogwarts existed and were probably, in fact, anxiously awaiting their eleventh birthdays so they too could receive that wondrous letter. All the children on that list received a magically generated and addressed letter. Sirius couldn't be entirely sure, but he would bet every galleon at Gringott's that McGonagall, like nearly every Ministry employee he had ever known, employed a signature charm to sign those letters. It would take far too long to sign each individually, and so she signed one and set a charm for her quill to sign the others accordingly. By the time her quill got to Potter, McGonagall was probably nowhere near the record book.

If only Harry had replied. But then again, how could he have known to write a letter and give it to a bird? He'd never seen anything of the sort and was rightfully terrified by the strange happenings around him. Of course he wanted to pretend it wasn't happening. Sirius knew the letters were charmed to detect when they had been read; he heard a few humorous stories about wizards and witches setting the letters aside for later, only to have their house bombarded by owls later. But that too was automatically done. If he had continued to ignore the letters, eventually the backlog would have been noticed and investigated. If he had responded, they would have checked the book and found his whereabouts. By opening the letter, Harry put an end to anything that might alert them to his presence. The moment he opened it, his miserable fate was sealed.

It would do no good now to rail against the policy and insist someone check every list every year. In hindsight, it was terrible oversight to allow such a thing, but the system had been in place for decades without incident. And now it was two years too late to save a child who had already suffered too much at the hands of those who ought to protect him.

Sirius had said nothing since Harry concluded the wretched tale. "Do you think I'm lying?" Harry asked miserably, mistaking Sirius's silent grief for anger or disbelief.

"No," he answered swiftly. "Of course not."

"But the owl..."

"I know about owls, Harry," he told him gently. "I have one myself. He's off right now, but I'll show you when he comes home."

"You...you have an owl?" Harry asked, his thin voice trembling.

"Yes, Harry. Many people like me – and like you – have them. They're useful for mail. Much faster than the post."

"L-like you?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Perhaps I should..." Sirius mused aloud, not certain how much to tell the boy, or how quickly. "Harry," he began again, watching his godson cautiously to gauge his reaction. This would not be easy or pleasant, and he hated that he was the one to do this. It should have been James or Lily explaining magic to Harry. It was their place to explain to their own child, but Harry was nowhere near ready for that shock. He was in far worse shape than Sirius had ever been in, but he still remembered that fragile feeling, that sensation of being stretched so thin that a single blow might break him. The wrong word, the wrong tone of voice, the wrong move...it might be the final straw that damaged the poor child beyond all repair. He wouldn't be responsible for that, and if it meant concealing the truth from James and Lily, so be it. "That letter you received," he finally continued, "is a very special thing. A good thing."

"No, it's not," Harry shook his head miserably. "I had to leave after that. Liam said. He was afraid of me. They all were. I'm a freak, and that stupid owl ruined everything!"

"You aren't a freak, Harry," Sirius countered.

"H-how do you know?"

"Because I received a letter myself. The very same one, in fact. It was one of the

happiest days of my life, except unlike you, I had been waiting on my letter. A letter from Hogwarts is a wonderful thing."

Harry only shook his head, and Sirius wished once more he could hug the boy to comfort him. It must have been terribly frightening to one day receive a missive from an owl telling you who and what you were, and Sirius was quite certain he would have thought it a hoax as well if he was in Harry's shoes.

"Have you ever heard of Hogwarts, Harry?"

"No, Sir."

Sirius sighed and fought the urge to rub at his temples in frustration. "Hogwarts is a school in Scotland. That letter was your acceptance letter. Your name has been down since you were born. Just as mine was."

Harry's head instantly snapped up at this. "Y-you?" he asked uncertainly.

"You and I are very much alike, Kid. Hogwarts is a school for people like us."

"Who are...people like us?" Harry inquired nervously.

"Wizards, Harry," he answered gently. "And witches. All magical children receive a letter the year they turn eleven. A letter just like yours, inviting them to come to Hogwarts."

"There's no such thing as a wizard," Harry shook his head indignantly. "There's no such thing as magic."

"How is it that you think that owl found you?"

"I...I don't know," Harry admitted. "But magic isn't real. You're having me on."

"No," he smiled gently. "Magic is very real. It's all around you, in fact. This house is magic, Harry. Would you like me to show you?"

Harry stubbornly shook his head, refusing to meet Sirius's gaze.

"Whoever told you that magic wasn't real didn't know the truth. There is magic. A whole world of magic. A world that you were a part of, Harry. You have magic in you, just like I have magic in me."

"That's a lie!" Harry protested. "I'm not a freak!"

"Of course you aren't," Sirius agreed. "Only you have a talent not everyone has. Think about it for a moment, Harry. Did you ever make anything happen just by thinking about it? Maybe when you were frightened or upset? Maybe something happened around you that you couldn't explain?"

This again drew Harry's eyes up, but he looked just as frightened as before. "What do you mean?" he asked nervously.

"Young wizards have magic, just like regular wizards," he tried to explain. "Except they don't know how to control it yet. It's called accidental magic. Sometimes a young wizard will do magic without meaning to, particularly if he's in trouble. Can you think of anytime something odd happened to you?"

"I...maybe," he admitted. "One time I...one time I just ended up on the roof!"

"Were you frightened?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Some boys were chasing me."

Accidental Apparition. It was nearly unheard of, and yet it explained a great many things. It probably happened to him once before...another time when he was in danger, another time when he was too young to control his magic but his magic still instinctively protected him. "That was magic, Harry," he informed him carefully. "You can do magic."

"No. It doesn't exist."

Sirius drew out his wand and showed it to Harry, whose green eyes had widened almost comically. "This is a wand. You should have gotten one when you were eleven, but we'll make sure you get one. This is how you do magic." He murmured a spell and aimed his wand at the teacup in front of him, transforming it into large bowl,

then back into a teacup. When Harry still watched in disbelief, he made water shoot out of his wand and into the teacup, then just as easily banished the cup.

"H-h-how did you do that?"

"With magic, Harry," he answered gently. "Would you like to try?"

"No!"

"It's all right. I promise nothing will happen. I can show you that it's true, Harry. I know it must seem impossible."

"No. No, I'm not a freak!"

"It doesn't make you a freak, Harry," he corrected again, silently vowing to find each and every person who ever dared to call this child a freak. They would pay, he decided. They would pay as dearly as Harry had paid. Every hurt inflicted would be turned back until they understood what they had done to this child. Afraid of his own magic, afraid of his own nature...it was shameful and wrong and sick, and it spoke to the dark parts of the human soul, the parts that hated what they could not know. He had forgotten there was evil in all the world, forgotten that Muggles could do just as much harm as Wizards.

"Normal people don't do that," Harry shook his head, showing signs of growing hysterical. "It isn't right!"

"There is nothing wrong with being magical, Harry," Sirius countered as gently as possible while still keeping his voice firm. "There are wizards and witches all around, and there isn't a thing wrong with them. Muggles just don't know about it, and that makes them frightened."

"Muggles?"

"That's what we call non-magical people. We have to stay hidden, so Muggles don't know there's magic, or wizards and witches. But there's a whole world of us, Harry. When you turn eleven, you go to Hogwarts and learn to use magic. I work for the Ministry of Magic, as an Auror. It's similar to what you call a policeman."

Harry's eyes instantly widened at the word, and Sirius realised it had been the wrong thing to say.

"You've nothing to fear. No one is going to bother you here."

Harry was silent for a long moment. Then, finally, he looked up with a fierce look in his eye and a confidence Sirius hadn't expected. "There's been some mistake," he announced. "You must have misunderstood. I'm not magic. The letter must have been for someone else."

"Take my wand, Harry," he instructed calmly, handing it across the table. "Pick it up," he urged. "And say Lumos."

Harry sat completely still.

"Perhaps you're right," Sirius finally told him. "Perhaps there has been a mistake. There is a way we can know for certain, but I need you to take the wand."

Harry swallowed and started to reach forward, then thought better of it. "What if I'm not?"

"Then we will forget about this," Sirius promised.

"Will you...send me back?"

"No, Harry," he shook his head. "You're safe here. You have my word on that. No matter what."

Harry nodded and reached for the wand, reluctantly holding it in one shaking hand.

"Now say Lumos," Sirius repeated.

"L-l-lumos," Harry tried, but nothing happened. He tried again, still stuttering on the word. "I told you!" he cried when it did nothing. "I'm not magic!"

"Slow down and say the word carefully," Sirius instructed. "You're frightened and stuttering. Lumos," he repeated once more.

"I don't want to," Harry shook his head. "Don't make me!"

Sirius counted to three and thought of Remus, attempting to invoke his friend's patience and ability to calm others. His levelheaded friend was always able to cope with situations such as these without resorting to hotheaded remarks or succumbing to frustration, both of which would only make this worse. "All right," he forced himself to agree. "I won't make you," he promised. "You can hold that and think on it for a bit. But you should know, Harry, there isn't a thing wrong with you, and magic is nothing to be afraid of."

Harry studied the wand for a long moment, not attempting the spell but not setting it down either. Sirius could see the wheels turning, knew there was a part of the boy that wanted to believe it despite his fear of his own strangeness.

When it became clear the boy had no intention of trying out the spell, Sirius decided to move the conversation along. Perhaps if he took the focus off for a few minutes, Harry would settle and feel more comfortable. "We have more we should talk about it, but I think we've had enough for tonight, yeah?" he asked his godson, waiting for a slight nod before continuing. "The house is magic, so it may seem odd to you. You can ask me about anything that confuses you. Nothing here will hurt you," he promised, then remembered the house-elf in the little closet. Well, hopefully nothing would hurt Harry, but he would have to warn him about Kreacher. "There is one thing you should know. I have a house-elf who lives here and helps me. He made the food tonight."

"An...an elf?" Harry asked with wide eyes. "They're real?"

Sirius tried his best to hold back a smile. He remembered the same look on many faces of his muggleborn peers, all so shocked each time they saw a new magical creature. Lily was one of the best to watch, her face always betraying her excitement over each new discovery. "House-elves," he corrected gently. "House-elves serve wizards and witches. I'm afraid mine is a bit barmy," he admitted. "He liked my parents and my brother far more than me. He's ornery and stubborn, but he can't hurt you. His name is Kreacher, and I've warned him to stay away."

Harry nodded, but his eyes were as big as saucers. Sirius sighed, realising it was probably better to get the introduction out of the way

so Harry wouldn't live in fear of the creature popping out from dark corners at every moment.

"Kreacher, come here," he ordered. Instantly, the little door creaked open, and the ugly, wrinkle-faced face appeared.

"Master?" Kreacher asked, bowing obediently.

Harry was suddenly breathing awfully hard, his face going a bit white. This was probably more real to him than the magic Sirius had done, as most Muggles had seen magic tricks and knew there was a secret explanation. There was no reasoning away of a house-elf. Harry's young mind could only accept what he was seeing, and it must come at a great shock.

"Harry, this is Kreacher," he explained. "Kreacher, you will do as Harry commands. For now you will stay away from his room unless told otherwise. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master Sirius," the elf bowed again.

"You may go," he dismissed him.

The elf returned to his hiding spot, and Sirius waited a few moments for Harry's face to regain some colour.

"I...may I go to my room now?" the frightened boy asked.

"Yes, of course," he nodded. "I'll be here if you need me," he promised. "Do you want more juice or tea to take with you?"

Harry only shook his head, looking quite ready to bolt. Sirius smiled gently, then watched as his terrified godson scrambled away.

It was hours before he saw Harry again. While the boy locked himself in his room, Sirius remembered that he would be expected at work tomorrow. Although the charms would keep Harry inside the house, he knew it would be far too much to leave him here on his own so soon. He winced as he thought of James's reaction to his absence in the morning, but it couldn't be helped. All would be explained in time, and for now, James might just have to worry a bit about his friend.

He wrote out a quick note to Rufus Scrimgeour, the Head Auror, explaining that he was ill and would be out for a day or two. His owl had not returned from hunting yet, but he would give her the letter when she returned. He didn't trust his acting ability quite enough to call James over the Floo, so he wrote another quick note explaining that he'd come down with a bit of a cold and decided to skive off for the day. James would never believe it; Sirius had reported in with every manner of dreadful injury before and had been dragged home on more than one occasion. With that thought in mind, he sealed off his Floo network to prevent any mishaps with Harry around. If the house-elf had frightened him, he couldn't begin to imagine what would happen if the face of James Potter – a face nearly identical to Harry's – suddenly appeared in the green flames.

Just as he was settling back into the sofa and contemplating a book to summon to pass the time, he heard quiet footsteps on the stairwell. He looked up and saw Harry walking slowly down the stairs. He held Sirius's wand in his hand, and the end was glowing light blue.

Harry sat in his room for a long while, staring at the odd, thin stick in his hand as frightened tears rolled down his cheeks. Just when he thought he might have found somewhere safe, the game changed once more. He was always one step behind, and he was tired...so tired. Tired of running, tired of hiding, tired of being afraid.

What Sirius told him was impossible. He knew that it was. Every instinct told him this was bad and wrong. And yet it made sense, in a way. He never could explain the things that happened to him. From suddenly appearing on the roof to his hair growing rapidly, from the owl at his window to glass exploding. There were so many things he'd never understood, and now Sirius was offering him an answer. Even more incredible, it didn't seem to be a lie. He'd seen Sirius do magic as easily as blinking, and if that wasn't enough, there had been the odd little thing that stepped out of the closet and nearly scared him out of his wits. He'd never seen such a thing, never knew a creature like that existed. And it talked and understood! It could only be magic. And if magic was real, perhaps it could finally explain the mysteries of Harry's life.

For over two years now, he'd grown more and more afraid of his own strange abilities. It always startled him, but once, he'd been secretly proud of himself. It had come in handy more than once as

he was shuffled from foster home to foster home. His odd skills saved him from tight spots, kept him from being hurt worse than he was. It hadn't always worked, but sometimes he saved himself without ever knowing how. And he liked that about himself, liked that there was something special about him.

Until the day it cost him everything. Until the day Liam told him he wasn't safe anymore. He never minded those other families giving him up; they all hurt him anyway, and he was better off without them. But Liam, Sara, Abby, Ryan, and Seth were all the family he ever needed. Liam was like his big brother and father at the same time. He was fun and made Harry laugh, he protected him, taught him, cared for him. Sara was annoying, but something of a little sister and at least a playmate from time to time. Abby was the mother of the little group, the one who let him help in the kitchen, the one who made sure he ate enough and had even given him medicine when he was sick. Ryan and Seth were a bit more aloof, but they all protected each other. They never would have let anyone lay a hand on him...until the owls came. They all turned on him, starting with Sara, and soon he was friendless once more.

Magic cost him the best place he'd ever lived, the only place he'd ever considered a home. If he was magic, he wasn't sure he liked it anymore. Sirius spoke of this Hogwarts place like it was some sort of sacred secret, but it brought Harry only pain. The letter didn't give him hope; it stole it from him. What was so great about being a wizard if it meant you went cold and hungry?

He was determined not to be a wizard. Now that he knew there was such a thing, he knew what he was trying to stop. Perhaps he could will himself out of it. If he tried hard enough, maybe it would go away. Maybe now that he knew why odd things happened to him, he could focus harder and make it stop. Then maybe he could find Liam and the others again, promise them he would never do it again.

He was attempting to work out an escape plan when he suddenly remembered something Sirius had said. "You're safe here. You have my word on that. No matter what."

No matter what. Magic or none. Wizard or not. Safety at no cost. A home with no conditions. Sirius had fed him his most delicious meal in ages, he had spoken to him kindly, he had filled his glass with that strange juice and let him have as much as he wanted. Harry was

rude and ate too fast, but Sirius didn't raise a hand or his voice. No matter what.

As much as he wanted to deny it, Liam had not been so accepting. Liam did not want him as he was. No one did. Not ever. And maybe Sirius would be no different...maybe he would grow tired of Harry like everyone else. But he had no idea where Liam was or if he'd be welcomed back. Leaving here was taking a great risk that he would not find shelter again, or food, and he would starve or freeze on the streets.

Magic cost him his home, but if it brought him another, just for a time...

Taking a deep breath, Harry gazed down at the stick once more. "Lumos," he murmured. He wasn't sure what he had wanted to happen, but in the instant after he uttered the word, nothing happened and his heart sank. So Sirius was wrong after all.

Then suddenly it happened. The wand lit up, emitting a soft blue light that was so beautiful he wanted to cry. It was amazing, really, that he had done that. He whispered a word, and the stick obeyed him. A strange warmth flooded through him, and he waved the stick around and felt a tingle in the air. The whole room seemed to shimmer, and he felt happier than he could ever remember feeling in his life.

He had done this. One word from him, and a light appeared. Maybe it was wrong, maybe he was a freak, but for the first time in recent memory, he had done something he was proud of.

Daring himself to be brave, he clutched the wand to his chest and stared at the blue light as he climbed out of the bed and headed for the stairs. When he reached the sitting room, Sirius gazed up at him in surprise, then seemed to notice the light.

"Congratulations, Harry," the man smiled at him. "You've just done your first spell."

Sirius said it like it was something to be proud of. Like he was proud of him. In spite of himself, Harry smiled back. "I felt strange," he admitted.

"Hmm," the man nodded. "It can feel that way, particularly when you first start out."

"So I'm...really a wizard?"

"Yes, Harry, you are. I imagine you're a powerful one indeed, doing a spell like that without any sort of training at all. Your accidental magic is impressive. I never did anything nearly so grand."

"Really?" he asked uncertainly.

"Really," Sirius nodded. "Would you like to try another?"

Harry gazed down at the light and nodded eagerly.

"This will make it stop. Just say 'Nox,'" he instructed.

"Nox," Harry repeated, and instantly, the light went out. "Lumos," he tried, and the light returned. He looked up to Sirius, wide-eyed with wonder, and the man just laughed in delight.

"Excellent!" he praised. "Splendid, Harry."

It was the first time anyone had said anything so kind, and suddenly magic didn't seem so bad.

"Come, and I'll tell you about wands," Sirius offered, patting the space next to him. Harry obeyed, but made sure to sit at the far end of the sofa. Sirius didn't seem to mind, and he started to tell Harry about buying a new wand at a place called Ollivander's, and how the wand chose the wizard. This wand had belonged to Sirius since he was just eleven years old, and he explained all about how he had gotten his letter to Hogwarts.

Harry listened to it all, soaking up every detail, until a thought suddenly occurred to him. "Sirius?" he asked. "If I'm a wizard, then the letter was real, and I was meant to go there? To Hogwarts?"

The man's smile vanished as he nodded. "Yes, Harry."

"What...what would have happened to me? If I said yes?"

"You would have gone to school, and..." he trailed off for a long moment, suddenly looking rather troubled. "You would have been given a safe place to stay a lot earlier," he finally finished.

"But then...my name is Harry? It truly is?"

"Yes," Sirius nodded again, his eyes fluttering closed for an instant in something that looked like pain.

But Harry didn't care. Not right now. He had a name. A real name. He had hoped for it, but he never let himself truly believe. "My name is Harry Potter," he whispered.

"You...you've had a long day," Sirius told him in a strained voice. "Perhaps you ought to go on to bed now."

Harry didn't want to go to bed, but Sirius looked tense and concerned, and the nerves that had disappeared suddenly returned in full force. He nodded obediently, not wanting to upset the man who was letting him stay here. "Yes, Sir," he agreed.

"Sirius," the man corrected him once. "My name is Sirius."

"Goodnight then, Sirius," he said quietly.

"Goodnight, Harry Potter."

A/N: Sorry I'm a bit behind this week! Been busy busy with work. Also, this has been written for a long time, but it was a bear to write and I still don't like it but couldn't stand tweaking it anymore. Thank you sooo much for reading and reviewing. I'm behind on responding to everyone, but I appreciate everyone who clicks on my story!

Chapter 8

James Potter read the brief note scrawled in his best mate's chicken scratch for the tenth time this morning and cursed under his breath. When he arrived at work this morning after his long, exhausting, mournful weekend, he had looked forward to seeing his best friend and making sure he was all right. His reticence this weekend had been troubling, and it wasn't like Sirius to stay away, especially on the anniversary of Harry's death. He just wanted to see his friend and make sure it was nothing more than the usual grief they experienced, but now Sirius was making up some rubbish about a cold. A cold.

He was worried. No, more than he worried. He was stressed, anxious, and quite frankly, terrified for his best friend.

Sirius Black had not led an easy life. When James first met him on the Hogwarts Express twenty some-odd years ago, he thought Sirius was quite possibly the funniest bloke he ever met. They were instant friends, aligning together against Severus Snape and forging a bond that would endure death, heartache, betrayal, and abuse. He never imagined that day on the train that he would find in Sirius a man as good as a brother to him, a friend who stood by him as he relentlessly pursued the witch who would become his wife, who would be there for him through the death of his parents, who would defend him against their enemies. Somehow, without ever having a proper parent, Sirius turned out to be a brave, noble, loyal man, who would die for his friends before he would let anyone or anything harm them. He was a stubborn man, too proud for his own good, and standing up for himself and his friends would cost him dearly, first at the hands of the Black family, and later at the hands of Death Eaters.

When they were eleven, James didn't know about parents who cursed their children. When they were eleven, James rather thought everyone lived a charmed life much like him. He was spoiled rotten, and he just sort of imagined everyone else was as well. The

Marauders would change his perspective of things, but it was Sirius who tilted his world right off its axis.

They were twelve the first time it happened. It was summer holidays, and Sirius showed up for a visit with a black eye. James's parents had looked at him in concern, and James later heard them whispering worriedly when they thought the boys weren't paying attention. Sirius had looked positively sick, and later, he made James promise he wouldn't tell Remus or Peter about the eye. At twelve, James didn't understand. He didn't know why his friend would make a fuss about a simple accident. Now in his thirties, James wondered how he had ever been so dense, how he had ever believed the nonsense Sirius used to make up to cover what his parents had done. More than anything, he wished he had realised it sooner, said something a bit earlier, stepped in before it had gone so far that Sirius was broken in ways that could never be fully repaired.

Oh, he wised up eventually. When they were fourteen, Sirius begged off supper their first night back from summer hols. It was so unlike Sirius that James suspected something amiss. Remus had nodded knowingly when James decided he didn't particularly need supper, either, and so James left the Great Hall and hurried to their dormitory to find Sirius quaking in the bed.

It was the first time he ever saw someone after the Cruciatus. It was the first time he had seen muscles trembling in the aftermath of torture. Seeing it on his best mate was damn near unbearable, and no one, not even James, could believe the ludicrous story about a random attack. After that night, he made sure to watch his friend a bit more closely, and from then on, he always noticed. He always knew when the Blacks were at it again. But he never did anything. Not enough, anyway. Sirius swore he could handle it, and James was too naïve then to truly understand. So he stood by and let it happen, providing a safe haven at Potter Manor when he could, healing wounds when he was able, and always making sure that Sirius knew he had someone to turn to when things got too bad.

In the end, Sirius had to be critically injured before anyone truly stepped in. Sirius had to show up at his house, broken and bleeding, before James confessed the extent of it to his parents. The Potters healed him, fed him potions, and stayed beside him through the night holding his hand and speaking words of comfort until dawn

broke and Sirius fell into an exhausted sleep. After that, no one questioned that Sirius would stay there. He was given his own room, decorated in Gryffindor crimson and gold, and they added a new place at the table.

Sirius never went back after that, but the damage was done. It manifested itself in a hundred little ways in the pranks that went too far, in that awful night he sent Snape to the Willow, in the moods that were so mercurial and troubleseome. Sometimes Sirius would sink into darkness, and James was always the only one who could bring him back. James was always the one who made him laugh again. When it was really bad, James was the one who sat awake with him so the nightmares wouldn't return, who fetched him tea so he could stay awake during classes, and who could be silent beside him until the darkness passed. It scared James that his best friend was so altered by the things that happened to him, but he vowed to never let the Blacks win.

Now, it seemed, something was happening to Sirius again. The anniversary of Harry's death had always been hard on him, but being alone this year had plunged him deeper into grief than the previous years. And now Sirius was not at work. Sirius had never missed a day of work unless someone forcefully removed him from the building. He loved being an Auror, and he hated Dark Wizards too much to stay away. Besides that, they were partners, and partners never abandoned one another.

A cold? A bloody cold? A cold had never stopped Sirius Black from anything, except perhaps homework. His absence was suspicious enough by itself, but when he read the note and immediately tossed the Floo powder into the fireplace, he was met by something he had never seen before: a blocked Floo. The fireplace at Grimmauld Place was shut to him.

At first he was shocked. Then offended. And now scared out of his mind. Something terrible was happening to Sirius, and for the first time in his life, he was keeping James out of it. He had made it quite clear he had no interest in discussing a thing with James, and when James shouted into his mirror, demanding the git listen to him, he had been met with only silence.

He was so agitated and confused, he spilled ink all over his reports and had to request new copies. He couldn't focus, noticing the

empty desk in the office they shared, and finally he grabbed the Floo powder and called Remus, hoping he wasn't teaching at the moment.

"Prongs?" Remus asked in surprise and knelt down in front of the fireplace.

"Are you teaching?"

"This is my free period."

"Have you talked to Sirius?" he asked quickly, cutting right to the chase.

Remus was the worst of them at lying, his guilt always too evident on his face. "I...well...yesterday, I believe it was."

"What are you keeping from me?" James demanded irritably, indescribably perturbed that Remus and Sirius were apparently keeping secrets from him now.

"James," his old friend sighed.

"Sirius isn't at work today. He closed the Floo. He won't answer the mirror. Don't I have a right to know what's wrong?"

"Sirius...has some things to deal with," Remus answered carefully.

"Since when does he keep that from me?"

Remus was quiet for a long moment, and James felt himself growing more annoyed by the second. "I understand that you're worried," Remus finally offered.

"Of course I'm worried!" he snapped. "Sirius has never done anything like this. He was upset the other night. We should have-"

"Let him alone this time, James," Remus advised him seriously.

"Why should I? You know Sirius, Moony. You know his moods. We don't know that he won't-"

"Sirius is fine, Prongs. He isn't going to do anything stupid."

"If he's fine, why is he refusing to speak to me?"

"It's just as I said. He has some things to deal with, but he's fine. This is one time you actually don't need to be worried about him. He has his reasons," Remus tried to placate. "Trust him."

"That would be a hell of a lot easier if he was the one telling me this," James growled. He knew he shouldn't be mad, knew it wasn't fair, but he was irritated anyway.

"He will," Remus assured him soothingly. "In time."

James sighed, fighting the urge to step through the fireplace to wallop the werewolf. He'd never been the one kept in the dark, and he found he didn't like it one bit. "You're certain I have nothing to be worried about?" he asked one final time.

"I'm certain," Remus nodded. "Except I do have your daughter in my class in twenty minutes, and that is always cause for alarm," he attempted to tease.

"Her brilliance is intimidating."

"Yes," Remus answered wryly. "That's precisely what I'm worried about."

Harry slept late in the morning, his exhaustion and his illness keeping him in bed until nearly noon. Sirius had eaten breakfast and had several cups of tea by the time the quiet boy appeared at the bottom of the stairwell, his dark hair incredibly mussed and his eyes still bleary with sleep. He looked more like James than ever with his hair all out of sorts like that, and Sirius couldn't help smiling as he remembered how irritated Lily always was when James purposely screwed up his hair. It was a constant complaint for years...until suddenly one day she started to like that messy mop of hair.

"Good morning," Sirius greeted brightly.

"Good morning," Harry mumbled quietly and rubbed at his eyes.

"Did you sleep all right?"

"Yes, Sir," he nodded, the politeness of yesterday obviously restored.

"Are you hungry? I'll have Kreacher prepare you breakfast," he offered. Harry said nothing, so Sirius stood and waved for him to follow him into the kitchen where Kreacher was scrubbing furiously at the sink. Harry's eyes widened again, as though he had realised this was not all some strange dream, and Sirius fought the urge to hug the boy. "Sit," he offered, gesturing for the table. "What would you like to eat?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry answered quietly.

It did matter, but Sirius wouldn't force it if Harry didn't feel ready to speak to him just yet. Today, Sirius would have to explain to the boy about his parents. It was probably too soon, but he couldn't hold James off forever. His friend was undoubtedly growing impatient, and if Sirius stalled much longer, someone was going to discover the news by accident. It would be hard enough to explain to Harry without having a hysterical James and Lily on his hands as well. He would have to keep the boy calm today, keep him peaceful and secure until it was time to deliver the news.

Unfortunately, the boy in question was looking quite pale, reminding Sirius of how frail he was. He was still recovering from hypothermia and infection, not to mention the beatings that left him bruised and scarred in more than just body. He looked so small as he sat down at the large table, and Sirius wondered if perhaps he ought to feed him and tuck him back in bed, leave all the talk for later when he was stronger.

Then Sirius remembered the note he sent James this morning, and the sealed-off fireplace. He heard his best friend's voice shouting from the mirror he had shoved in the sock drawer, and he knew it wasn't fair. Not to James, not to Lily, not even to Harry. They were forging some semblance of a fragile trust, and to Harry, withholding truth would be the same as lying. It was imperative to tell him, and tell him quickly, or Harry might never bring himself to believe that adults could really have his best in mind.

As Harry sipped at a glass of pumpkin juice, Sirius ordered Kreacher to make tea, toast, eggs, and oatmeal. The little elf bowed deeply and set to work, surprisingly keeping his mouth shut this time as he hurried about with his task.

"I think you must have tamed my elf, mate," Sirius grinned at Harry. "He muttered at me when I asked him to make my breakfast, but yours..."

Harry managed a weak smile and then turned his gaze to the floor. Last night he seemed to break out of his shyness a bit, but a full night's sleep had returned him to fearful reticence.

"Want to try the wand again?" Sirius asked after a moment, extracting his wand from the inside of his robes.

"No, Sir," Harry whispered. "Thank you."

"Is something the matter, Harry? You're a bit quiet."

Harry just shook his head, and Sirius wondered yet again if he could do this again. As he debated the wisdom of his plan, his owl flew up to the windowsill and tapped at it. He rose to let the bird in, untying the parchment from his leg. He unrolled it, not at all surprised when he recognised James's handwriting.

Padfoot,

Moony assures me you are all right, but you won't be if you don't answer your mirror soon! You can have one more day, then I'm coming over. Better yet, I'll send Lily after you. You know how she loves to prepare potions for us. I'll tell her about your cold so you can have some homemade Pepper-Up.

Prongs

Sirius had to laugh aloud at the threat; Lily was a skilled potions maker, but she absolutely refused to make them taste better. She reasoned that Lydia – and the Marauders – would be a bit more cautious if the cure was nearly worse than the disease. Her Pepper-Up was strong and effective, but it tasted like old socks. It was often the threat of it that convinced Lydia to wear a jacket outside.

Turning back to Harry, Sirius noticed that the boy had perked up a little and was gazing intently at the owl. After a moment's thought, Sirius held out his arm to his owl and let him climb up, then walked him over to Harry.

"Harry, this is Rocco, my owl."

"It...it carries your post?"

"Yes," he nodded. "Would you like to hold him? He's gentle," he promised.

Harry thought for a moment, and Sirius sensed the desire he was attempting to hide. After close to a minute, Harry finally nodded and held out his arm. Rocco happily stepped over to the boy, hooting softly as Harry used his other hand to ruffle the bird's feathers. Sirius summoned his small container of owl treats, then handed one to Harry so he could offer it to Harry. Harry accepted, then held out the small treat to Rocco. Rocco quickly snatched it up and ate happily, and Harry's lips turned upward in a delighted grin.

Sirius watched his godson for a moment, lost in the boy's happy smile. He looked carefree for a moment, and for the first time, he looked like any boy of thirteen should. The owl, it seemed, was a key to drawing Harry out of himself, and that was information he would file away for later. It also gave him the perfect opening, as well as an extra layer of comfort for Harry.

Sirius placed Rocco back at the window while Harry ate his breakfast, but his godson kept looking over at the bird as he scarfed down his food. He couldn't finish even half of what Kreacher prepared, but he did so with a gusto that hinted at his desperation and the fear that meals would be few and far between. Unlikely, with Kreacher around, Sirius thought wryly. The elf might despise him, but he still lived to serve, and something had changed overnight to make the elf suddenly all too happy to be caring for Harry. Sirius had a feeling it had much to do with Harry's poor condition; give a house-elf a real job that needed tending to – that mattered – and he would perk right up.

When Harry gave up on his breakfast, Sirius retrieved Rocco and returned him to his godson. The owl took a quick liking to his new friend, and he hooted happily as Harry stroked his head.

"My dearest friend gave me Rocco," Sirius explained quietly. "Shortly after we graduated from Hogwarts. I borrowed him all the time, you see, so he bought me my own when I got my own flat."

"I like him," Harry said softly.

"I believe it's mutual," he smiled. "He's a good owl. Named for the patron saint of dogs. Bit of a joke between your – between my best mate and me," he recovered quickly.

"You named your owl after the saint of dogs?"

Sirius laughed a little, surprised and delighted that Harry had dared to speak his mind. "A good point you make, mate. I suppose it's a bit strange."

"I think it's strange that owls carry the post. I didn't know," Harry shook his head.

"It will seem like a dream for a bit, I would imagine," he agreed. "And I'm afraid there's a bit more I need to tell you, Harry."

"More?" the poor kid swallowed nervously.

"More," he confirmed. "I'm terribly sorry to lay this all on you, but there's so much...so much you don't know."

Harry gulped again, but he nodded his consent as he continued to stroke the bird's feathers.

"My best friend...the one who gave me Rocco...his name is James. We met on the train to Hogwarts when we were eleven. James...he's better than a friend, Harry. He's my brother. He's all the family I ever really needed. He helped me out of every tight spot...got me into a few as well, of course," he admitted with a crooked grin. "We've been there for each other through everything."

Harry looked absolutely bewildered, and Sirius took a deep, steadying breath and tried to think about the story he needed to tell, the story of a family who lost everything. Harry needed to know about his parents, he needed to care, to see how deeply they loved, or it would all be ruined. The news that he was not alone, that he had real, living parents could be a blessed relief or a terrible curse. Realising that all his suffering had been senseless, that he had a home and a family just might break him. He needed to know that they loved each other – and him – or he would never accept what he was being told.

"James is the best man I've ever known," he continued. "And when we were in school, he fell for a girl named Lily. She was in our house, at school. She was beautiful and smart...and good with a hex," he added. "She didn't give James a second glance at the beginning, but James never gave up on her. Not once. He loved her from the start, and in our last year, he did some growing up. Things were...different then, Harry. We were in a war, you see, and people not much older than us were dying."

"A war?" Harry echoed, eyes widening.

"Yes," he nodded. "A very bad wizard, Voldemort, was coming to power. He believed that magic only belonged to some witches and wizards, and he was hurting people as he tried to take power. It was a frightening time, Harry. But James grew up and took his place in the war. He vowed to fight for our side, and Lily saw that. She fell in love, and he asked her to marry him just before we graduated."

Harry nodded slowly, thoughtfully, unable to see how the pieces came together just yet. He still didn't know why this mattered, how it related to him, but he would.

"I was best man at their wedding. It was one of the best days of my life," he smiled fondly, remembering the joy and laughter, remembering the flowing wine and firewhiskey, the dancing and the smiles. In the midst of war there was life, and none of them had ever dreamed what would be robbed from them. They were so young and naïve in spite of it all, never once imagining the way it could all fall apart, the way one of their own could betray them and shatter this lovely world they created. He shook his head, clearing away the memories and focusing on the boy in front of him. "It became even better when they had a baby, a little boy. James and Lily made me his godfather. I loved him...Merlin, I loved him. Cutest thing I've ever seen. And happy, too. He was always laughing and smiling. It made the whole world right when he did that."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked quietly, picking up on the wistful tone.

"There was a prophecy made about him. Do you know what that is, Harry?"

Harry shook his head.

"A prophecy is a prediction, of sorts. Unreliable magic, really, but it can be powerful if one believes in it. The prophecy made about my godson predicted that he would be the one to stop Voldemort. It said that he was the one with the power to destroy him. And Voldemort believed it, Harry. He was afraid that my baby godson would grow up and kill him someday. Voldemort couldn't bear that. He wanted power, and he believed that sweet little boy could stop him."

"Did you believe it?"

Sirius sighed and thought hard about the question. He hadn't taken Divination in school. It seemed such a worthless subject, even then, and he wasn't interested in anyone making his destiny for him. But when the prophecy was made, when James and a very pregnant Lily told him about their son...he couldn't help being afraid. "I don't know, Harry," he answered honestly. "I was afraid for him. For James and Lily."

"So did he kill him?" Harry asked curiously.

"He did," Sirius nodded. "But it all went wrong, Harry. We had tried very hard to protect the baby and keep him away from Voldemort. We did a very special sort of magic to hide him, and his mum and dad. A friend of ours, a man named Peter Pettigrew, he was to keep the secret of where they were. Only he betrayed us, Harry, and he told Voldemort. Once he told Voldemort, the spell was broken and they could be found. Voldemort attacked my friends on Halloween in 1981."

Harry frowned a little at this. "But I thought your best friend was alive," he protested in confusion.

"He is. James and Lily both survived the attack. We still don't know why, Harry. Voldemort had never left anyone alive before that."

"What about the baby?"

"We believed he was dead," Sirius answered quietly. "When I arrived, the house was on fire. The evil wizard was dead. James and Lily had tried to get to the nursery, and they found Voldemort dead on the ground. But the nursery was burning down, Harry. They

couldn't get inside. My godson's crib...it had caught fire," he nearly choked, still struggling with the memories even as his living godson sat in front of him. "No one could get to the baby in time. The house burned down. James and Lily survived, but no one believed the baby could have. He was so little."

"But...he killed that bad wizard, didn't he?"

It cut Sirius to the quick that his godson realised so easily what none of them had. Harry had killed Voldemort, an impossible feat for an infant, and yet they believed he perished. Survival seemed impossible, but their boy had already accomplished that once. They should have looked, they should have at least tried. Voldemort was dead, and they should have realised strange things happened in that house. They should have realised there was a chance, no matter how small. "We never knew how," he answered quietly. "We loved that little boy, but the fire destroyed everything, Harry. So every year, since that night, we've gone to his grave. Every day, we've missed that wonderful boy."

Harry sat quietly for a few moments, then his expression grew inexplicably sad and dejected. He nodded and gazed down at the bird, tears filling his green eyes as he continued to stroke Rocco's head.

"Harry?" Sirius questioned. "What is it?"

"I think I understand."

"You do?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes," his godson nodded. "You...you miss him. And I don't have any parents, or a godfather, or anything like that, so I can sort of...you want me to take his place?"

"No, Harry," he shook his head quickly in horror. "No, God...no. I want you, just as you are."

"I...I don't understand..."

"I've really bollixed this up, haven't I?" he sighed, raising a hand to rub his weary temple, feeling the beginnings of a headache forming there. "Harry, James and Lily are your parents. Their surname is

Potter. They had a son named Harry. I want you because you are that boy. You are my godson. You disappeared twelve years ago, on Halloween, to be precise. But I've found you now. You've come home. We have our Harry back."

Harry's arm abruptly dropped, and Rocco flew away with a startled hoot. But Harry didn't seem to notice. He slowly backed away from Sirius, his face draining of all colour. "N-no," he shook his head frantically. "That's not...that's not true. My parents are dead."

"No, Harry," he countered gently. "Your parents are very much alive. That note I received earlier was from James. From your father."

"No. They're dead. They died when I was a baby. That's why I got left. That's why I had to go to the home, and then to all those families. My parents are dead," he repeated.

"Your parents only lost you, Harry. We all believed you died in the fire. I don't know how you escaped, but you did. Only we didn't know it."

"No," Harry whimpered. "You're lying. You are bad! And you're trying to trick me!"

"No!" he defended himself quickly. "I would never do that, Harry."

"Liar!" Harry accused, suddenly bolting of his seat and running for the door. Sirius was right on his heels, though he knew his godson couldn't escape. Harry headed straight for the door, fighting all over again with the knob that refused to yield. He pulled and he yanked and then began kicking at the door with all of his strength, crying out in fear and frustration when nothing happened.

"Harry, stop," Sirius pleaded as the boy continued his futile struggle. He would wear himself out like this, and it couldn't be good for him after how ill he'd been.

But Harry wasn't giving up. He seemed convinced he could escape if he only tried a bit harder, not understanding that the magic was too powerful. Sirius had sealed the doors shut so that nothing would break them down without his consent, and save for an explosion of accidental magic, Harry wasn't going anywhere. That didn't stop him from trying, though. First he pulled, then he kicked, and then he

began beating against the door. He was crying and shaking and gasping for air, but still he continued.

After a few minutes, Sirius was nearly at his wit's end, ready to release the poor kid and let him go wherever he wanted to go, just as long as he quit fighting. "Let me go! Let me go!" Harry cried.

"I can't, Harry," he reminded him softly, daring to take a step closer. This only agitated him further, and the boy doubled his efforts despite his obvious exhaustion. Any fragile trust was broken now, probably beyond all repair. Still, Sirius could not let him go, and certainly not like this.

"Please stop fighting," Sirius implored. "You're tired, Harry. It won't open. You know it won't open."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Harry sobbed miserably. "I'm not him! I'm not him! Just let me go!"

He fought for another fifteen minutes – far longer than Sirius thought he could possibly hold out. Every minute was like torture, but nothing he did seemed to help. No words calmed him, and his presence only upset Harry more. In the end, he could only watch and hope it ended soon.

Finally, finally, Harry slid down to the floor. He still pounded weakly against the unyielding barrier, but after a moment, even that stopped and he whimpered in pain and terror. Cautiously, Sirius walked over to his side and gasped softly in dismay when he saw the state of his godson's hands; he'd beaten against the door until they were bloodied. His breathing was ragged and laboured from the effort he'd expended, and his chest lurched as he struggled to draw air again.

"Calm down, mate," Sirius urged as he knelt down beside him and summoned supplies to bandage and heal his hands. "You'll breathe easier when you relax."

He waited patiently for several minutes as Harry regained control. Even after his breathing evened out, he continued to tremble from fear and exhaustion, silent tears running down his pale cheeks. "Why won't you let me go?" he asked miserably.

"Because you're my godson," Sirius answered quietly. "I won't let you be hurt again."

"I'm not him," Harry shook his head. "I couldn't be. He died. My real parents are dead."

"Your parents are James and Lily Potter, and they are very much alive," he countered steadily. "Your name is Harry James Potter. You were born on July 31st, 1980. You turned thirteen this July. You'd be in your third year of Hogwarts now."

"It's a lie," Harry protested.

"I recognised you, Harry. You look so like your father. He had the same dark hair you have. Yours is just as messy as his," he tried to tease. "You look just like him, except for your eyes. Your eyes are all Lily. Hers are the exact same shade of green."

"It's a coincidence," the boy refused.

"This scar that you have, Harry. This is a special scar. I knew it right away. That kind of scar comes from a very powerful curse. You've had it as long as you remember, haven't you?"

Harry nodded somewhat reluctantly.

"I think you got this the night you were attacked," he explained gently. "When Voldemort tried to kill you."

"You don't know that," Harry shook his head. "I can't really be him."

"You are, Harry. I know that it's true. My friend Remus came over to help me while you were ill. While you slept, we did a charm," he confessed. "It was a test of your blood to reveal who you were. The magic couldn't lie, Harry. You are my godson."

"It's a mistake then," Harry insisted.

Sirius frowned and held out his wand. "May I clean this up?" he asked. Harry looked uncertain, but he offered his hands after a moment. Sirius waved his wand and cleaned off the blood, then healed the cuts as well as he could and began to wrap them in soft bandaging.

It must be overwhelming to learn so much about oneself in 24 short hours, but Harry's reaction still astounded him a bit. Harry had been on his own all this time, struggling to feed himself and keep himself dry and warm. Why would the news that he was not alone be so unwelcome? His parents were kind, loving people, not monsters, and they would want him home. They would want to bring him to his own home with his own room with his own things, where he would be loved and taken care of every day. Surely any boy in Harry's situation would dream of such a life. Why then was Harry so desperate to believe it a lie?

"You have parents, Harry. A mum and a dad who love you. And a godfather," he added meaningfully. "I know it must be terribly confusing, but don't you want that?"

Harry yanked his hands away just as Sirius finished with the bandages. "It can't be true," he shook his head once more. "A mum and dad would have looked for me."

"Oh Harry," he sighed, finally realising why the boy was so stubbornly resisting the idea of a family, why it was so horrifying for him to consider that he might not be alone. He had been forced to raise himself, and perhaps he had justified it all his life, thinking his real family was dead. Sirius knew something of abandonment, of being unwanted, and he knew how deeply that could cut. He'd never been quite right himself, and he'd had a decade and a half to heal.

"A mum and a dad wouldn't have left me by myself."

"Harry, the night you...the night it happened," he said carefully, "your nursery was on fire. No one could get in. By the time the fire was stopped, the house was gone. We did everything we could think of, but the charms told us there was no one alive inside. You must understand, Harry, what you did, the way you survived ought to have been impossible."

"But I'm right here."

"If we had known, we would have found you," he vowed. "I've no idea how you managed to survive. Everything indicated you should have died in the fire."

"If I defeated an evil wizard, they should have known! They should have at least tried! Instead they just left me! They probably never even wanted me! Just like everyone else!"

"That isn't true," Sirius swore fiercely. "You were desperately wanted, Harry. You are desperately wanted."

Harry wiped awkwardly at his tears with bandaged hands. "They didn't look for me. They let this happen."

"It will break their hearts, mate. They never wanted this for you."

"I don't have parents. My parents are dead. I don't ever want to see James and Lily."

"Harry..."

"May I please go to my room now?"

"Harry, wait."

"If you won't let me go, I'd like to go to my room now," he requested again. And Sirius didn't have the heart to deny him. As he nodded his consent, he felt so much older than his thirty-four years. He had hoped to reunite a family, but now it would fall to him to explain to James and Lily that their son was indeed alive, but that he hated them. He wasn't even certain anymore that Harry was wrong to blame them, to blame any of them. They made so many mistakes with him, so many unforgivable errors, from trusting Peter Pettigrew to giving up when it seemed hopeless. If they had been braver, they might have gone into that room and discovered that the remains were missing. None of them had the strength to search for his ashes, and so they never realised he still lived.

A pang of miserable regret left him panting as Harry silently retreated up the stairwell to his room. A simple locator spell. It would have been so easy. The same night the house burned down, they could have found Harry and held him in their arms once more. A bit more perseverance, a bit more strength of heart, and their boy could have grown up loved and cherished as he was always meant to be.

This would kill James and Lily. It would utterly destroy them to learn what hell they inadvertently sentenced their son to live. And for the first time, Sirius wondered if maybe, perhaps, they deserved it.

A/N: Nothing to say except THANK YOU to all my readers and reviewers, and enjoy the next chapter!

Chapter 9

Harry did not dare to stray from his bedroom for the rest of the day. He sat huddled on the bed, clutching the blankets around him and hugging a pillow to his chest for hours, listening to Sirius putter around the house. Once an hour, the ancient stairs would creak and groan under the man's weight, and Harry would hold his breath as he heard footsteps approaching his room. Sirius seemed to stand just outside the threshold for a moment, then knocked on the door. Each time, Harry refused to answer. Sirius would sigh, wait another moment, and then return downstairs. The process repeated itself all afternoon.

At supper time, Sirius tried again and this time spoke to him, urging him to come out of his room for dinner. Harry still said nothing, and after a few minutes, Sirius explained that he was leaving food just outside the door.

But Harry would not eat it. He knew now what Sirius had planned for him, and though it was not the nefarious plot he originally believed, it was no less dangerous. He was going to give him back to James and Lily Potter. He was going to throw him back to the parents who abandoned him. But Harry didn't have to go along with it, not without a fight, anyway. He would rather escape of his own free will than be tossed back on the streets by his own mum and dad, and he knew that was how this story ended.

They left him alone. All this time, and they left him alone. He had parents, real, living parents, and they didn't want him. They allowed him to live on the streets, to be beaten and hurt by foster families, to be cold and wet and freezing. They went to bed in their warm, comfortable bed each night never caring that he was huddled on a cold stone floor with a thin jacket to protect him. He would not go back to those people, not ever. He would do everything he had to do to escape.

Sirius wasn't really a bad bloke. He didn't understand, but at least he was nice. He hadn't even yelled when Harry beat on the door. He didn't scold when Harry cried like a baby. He didn't even get mad that Harry got blood all over the floor. Instead, he had wrapped up

Harry's hands as though he actually cared about the injuries, not the blood left on the floor. It was strange, but he seemed to be genuinely concerned about Harry's well-being. Perhaps if he refused food long enough, Sirius would see what he was doing. Perhaps Sirius would start to understand that Harry could not, would not, go to those people. And then maybe he would let him go.

The thought brought fresh tears to Harry's eyes as he clutched the warm blanket closer. He wanted to stay here, at least a few days more. He liked it here, despite the odd candlelight, and the weird shrivelled creature in the kitchen, and the magic that was used so freely. He still didn't understand what was happening – or why – but he liked this quiet, peaceful room with its big soft bed and mountains of covers. He liked the food that filled the table, and the juice Sirius kept insisting he drink. It tasted so sweet and comforting, and it had been so long since he'd had anything but water from the tap. He knew this could never last, but he had hoped he could stay a few weeks, at the very least. Now James and Lily Potter would steal that from him, and he wept silent tears as childhood fantasies were demolished.

He had dreamed for so long of his parents. He pictured them as warm, kind people with a big house and friendly smiles. He imagined hugs from his mum and playtime with his dad, and he pictured them beaming at him with pride as no one had ever done. In his mind, his mum and dad were the most wonderful people in the world, and they loved him so very much. His dad was a good man with a respectable job, and his mum was the kindly sort who baked biscuits and sang songs to lull him to sleep. Sometimes he even thought he remembered her voice singing to him, but now he knew better. Now he knew his real mother never would have sang him lullabies. The parents of his daydreams would never have left him if they had any say in the matter, and so his whole life, he believed them dead. It was the only thing that made it all right to be without them. They died, and that wasn't their fault. They never would have let him be alone if they could have stopped it.

But James and Lily Potter didn't even look for him. And now Harry knew the truth; they didn't want him any more than the Parkers, or the Corbetts, or any of the families who had taken him in and then cast him off. His real parents hated him as much as the foster parents did. His real parents threw him away like Liam did.

He was unwanted. He had always known that to be true. It was beat into him for as long as he could remember. No one wanted a freak like him. But he had hoped that he didn't begin his life so unwanted, that something had happened to make him this way and once upon a time, he had been loved and cherished. Now he knew better. Now he knew that from the moment he was born, there was no one who wanted to keep him. He was worthless, he was nothing. Otherwise his parents would have loved him. Otherwise his parents would have kept him. The parents of his daydreams would never have rested until he was found, but the parents of his reality decided he was not worth searching for. He was not worth a home and a bed or nighttime lullabies.

He would rather live alone on the floor of that old abandoned warehouse than hear the words again. Sirius spoke of James and Lily Potter as though they were kind souls who had loved their child, but he didn't know. He didn't understand what it was like to be alone, to be frightened you would fall asleep and never wake up because you were so cold, or so hungry, or so hurt. He didn't know what it was like to watch other children hold tight to the hands of their parents and know that you had only yourself for protection.

But Harry knew. Harry knew where it was safe to hide. Harry knew never to accept "generosity" from strangers. Harry knew how to quell the cramps of hunger so he could fall asleep. He knew all those things because his parents never came looking for him, because the families he had lived with in their stead were so terrible he would rather take his chances on the street. He would not go to James and Lily Potter hoping for a family when he knew it could never be. Better to accept his lot in life now than make believe that there was good waiting him just around the bend. Better to accept that he was alone and unloved than face the sting of rejection yet again. He had survived before, and he would survive again.

His traitorous stomach growled at the aroma of his supper wafted in, but he was no stranger to hunger. He had eaten a veritable feast this morning, so he knew he could make it days before the weakness would take over. By then, perhaps Sirius would have come to his senses and released him. He only had to wait it out a few days, and then he would be free.

Willing himself to be strong, he turned away from the door and climbed beneath the covers, curling tightly to keep himself warm. He

closed his mind to the quiet pleading just beyond his room and allowed himself to drift away.

It was cold. So very cold. The man in black was standing before him, his face hooded but his laughter echoing in the small room. "Harry!" a woman's voice kept screaming, over and over and over again.

Green light flashed, and the woman's screaming grew louder. Then came the pain. Sharp and intense, searing through his head. The green light suddenly vanished, and the world grew silent for an instant, only an instant.

The flames shot up around him. He could feel the burning and smelled ash and soot and death. The woman was not screaming anymore, or he could not hear her over the roar of fire. He cried for someone to help him, reached his hands through the bars around him but felt only the flames. He was burning, and no one would help him. The world was on fire, and there was no escape. All he knew was pain and death and fire.

And then nothing.

"Shh, shh," someone was hushing him. Someone kept screaming so loud it was hurting Harry's ears, but still the man beside him tried to quiet him. Harry's head was pounding furiously, or he would have questioned why the man was hushing him when it was clear the other person was the problem.

The screaming wouldn't stop. And then suddenly Harry's throat was hurting as though he was being stabbed, and he was thirsty...so thirsty. He wanted the screaming to stop so he could get up and get a glass of water.

"Shh," the man insisted. "You're all right, Harry. You're all right."

The man was speaking to him, and suddenly Harry realised he was the one screaming. His voice was growing hoarse, and his throat hurt because he'd been hollering for some unknown period. He forced himself to stop and clenched his eyes shut, trying to remember where he was, trying to remember why he was so frightened.

The images rolled back to him in waves. The black hood. The green light. The flames. Oh God, the flames...

He had always been prone to nightmares. When he first left the Parkers, he woke screaming almost every night as memories of his closet returned. He dreamed most nights of the dark little room and the blows upon his back. The green light, the flames, the scream...it felt familiar, as though he'd had this dream before, but he could not remember when, and he could not put voice to the fears except to sob.

Eventually he realised there were strong arms wrapped around him. Warm hands were rubbing his back in soothing circles, and a deep voice kept repeating comforting words. He couldn't remember where he was, or who he was with, or why he was here. He remembered only the flames, and so he buried himself deeper into the arms wrapped around him, trying desperately to escape the scorching fire attempting to consume him.

Strangely, the person holding him did not seem to mind. Harry felt himself gathered closer, and one hand moved to brush soothingly through his hair. "It's all right," the voice kept telling him. "It was only a dream. Only a dream."

"The fire," he protested. "The flames."

"It's over now. You're safe. Hush now."

Reality slowly returned, and the images from his nightmare began to melt away. He remembered Sirius now, remembered his bedroom in the strange old house, and he recalled the bewildering tale he'd been told. His stomach churned as he realised the nightmare was really a memory, and he scrambled out of Sirius's grasp just in time to heave onto the floor. The vomiting was painful on his raw throat, and even when the contents of his stomach were expelled, he continued dry heaving as he crouched miserably on the wooden floor.

In the midst of his pain, his humiliation, and his horror, he could think of only one thing: he was leaving. Sirius was going to make him leave. Sirius was going to give him back to the people who had let him be eaten up by those flames. Hours ago escape had seemed the only option, but now he wanted nothing more than to stay. He

didn't want to be alone anymore. He didn't want to wake like this without anyone to promise him it was over. He didn't understand why he was so unwanted, why anyone would let a baby burn up in that fire. He couldn't have done anything wrong, so why didn't they want him? Why couldn't he ever stay anywhere?

"Don't make me go!" he pleaded as his knees ground into the hardwood floor.

"Please don't make me go!"

Sirius joined him on the floor and quickly cleaned up the floor with a spell. Harry was too exhausted to care about the magic, and he tried to draw himself away from Sirius so he couldn't be smacked for making a mess. Normally he might submit to his punishment, but not now, not tonight. He was so tired, and the horrible images were still burned in his mind. He could still hear a woman screaming his name, and he realised now who she was.

He heaved again, the bile causing him to cough as his eyes watered. He briefly wondered why Sirius had rescued him at all, why he couldn't leave good enough alone and let him die on that park bench. That was the fate he deserved. That was the fate of an unwanted child, destitute and abandoned by everyone who ever should have loved him.

"Oh Love," Sirius sighed and moved closer, gently reaching out and placing a hand on his back. Harry didn't respond, still crouched on the ground as nausea roiled through his stomach. "You've having quite a rough night, aren't you?" He murmured something under his breath, and then Harry felt something cool and wet drape across his neck. "Take a few deep breaths," Sirius coaxed. "It will pass."

Harry did as he was told, desperate for the nausea to fade. As he sat and shivered on the floor, he felt long fingers combing through his hair. It felt so good and comforting, and he sank into the touch as the nausea finally began to ebb. He was left with bone-crushing weariness, but at least he no longer felt the need to sick up all over the clean floor.

"There. Better?" Sirius asked.

"Y-yes," he managed hoarsely.

"Think you can stand? I'll fetch clean pyjamas, then we'll get you some tea and a bit of toast, yeah?"

Harry forced himself to nod, and Sirius helped him up and kept an arm around his waist to steady him. He soon found himself presented with a clean pair of pyjamas, as soft and wonderful as the first, and Sirius left him just long enough to allow him to change in private before retrieving him to help him down the stairs. Harry was a little embarrassed by the arm around his shoulder, but his knees were shaking with every step, so he didn't protest.

"Here, sit," Sirius instructed as he pulled out a chair for him at the table. Harry sank into it gratefully, and then Kreacher's head popped out of the little closet. The moment Kreacher saw him, he scrambled into action. "Tea and toast, Kreacher," Sirius instructed. Harry heard muttering about special elf recipes, and he watched dazedly as the wizened creature fussed about the kitchen preparing the tea.

Harry didn't know anything about house-elves or their special recipes, but the tea Kreacher handed him was the perfect temperature with just the right amount of sweetness. The churning in his stomach began to vanish almost immediately, and he greedily drank up the contents of his teacup.

"Think you can eat?" Sirius asked, still frowning a little as he sat down across from Harry at the old wooden table and handed him a plate. "Try a bit of toast, if you think you're up to it."

The idea surprisingly didn't turn his stomach, so he nibbled at the toast, particularly the bits with delicious marmalade. "Thank you," he remembered to say quietly, though he was beginning to realise such formalities were not necessary here.

"Of course," Sirius smiled gently.

"I'm sorry I made a mess."

"You couldn't help it. There's nothing to be sorry for. It's easily fixed," Sirius assured him.

"I'm sorry I screamed so much," he added, hoping Sirius had not yet decided he was too much of a burden to keep around.

"Harry," the man sighed, sounding frustrated. Harry bit his lip, wondering if it had been wrong to apologise. "I forced a lot on you today. You've nothing to be sorry about. Were you dreaming about the fire?"

Harry didn't answer, but shut his eyes to try to stop the images from returning

"I'm sorry, Harry. I know this was too much for you to handle, and far too soon after you've been ill," Sirius apologised wearily.

Harry couldn't bring himself to say it was all right. It wasn't. Not even a little. A few days ago he'd been a homeless orphan. Today he was a wizard with parents and a godfather. A few days ago he was an unwanted waif, a nobody, the scum on the bottom of the shoes of the people who passed him by each and every day. Now he learned that his life had been determined before he was even born, that he had survived the impossible, and that his parents had long ago accepted him as dead.

Last night, the idea of magic both terrified and enthralled him. As soon as he worked past the initial terror, he felt a huge sense of relief. There were other people like him. Even Sirius had magic, just like him. And he had obviously done all right for himself since he had this big house filled with expensive things and wore nice clothes and always had plenty of food around. It was nice to know he wasn't just a freak, that he was actually quite special.

But he wasn't special enough. His parents were magic, too, and he wasn't even special enough that they looked for him after the fire. In his dream, that woman – his mum – called his name, but where was she when the fire threatened to burn him up? Had she even tried to get to him? She let him die alone in that room, and she probably wouldn't care he was alive. She accepted his death long ago without a second thought.

No, none of this was all right, and Harry refused to tell Sirius it was. Even the thought of leaving here, of being sent to live with parents who would quickly tire of him...

"Where do you think I'm going to make you go?" Sirius asked him quietly after a long silence.

Harry stared down at the ancient table with its many scars and markings. It was a bit like him...used up and tainted. He found himself gazing at a particularly deep gash in the wood and wondering how it got there, who put it there, why they would want to. That was the part he never understood, really. Sometimes he was punished for doing bad things - the Parkers really hadn't liked it when he did magic, even if it was by accident. But sometimes they hurt him even when he'd done nothing wrong. Even when he tried so hard to follow the rules, he still received the blows. As though it was him that was wrong, not anything he had done. Was that what James and Lily thought of him, too?

"I know you're upset, but please answer me. Where do you think I'm going to make you go?" Sirius repeated himself.

"To...them," he answered softly. "James and Lily."

Sirius looked sad and troubled, but he shook his head. "I have to tell them, Harry. Your dad - James - is my best friend. He'll be wondering why I've kept away."

"I know," Harry answered miserably. And he did, really. Sirius had only known him a couple of days, and he'd known James all his life almost. Of course he would pick James over Harry.

"I think you ought to talk to them, if you think you can," Sirius added. "But that will be your decision."

Harry nodded and set down the toast, no longer interested. He stared blankly at his plate for a moment before really processing what Sirius had said. "You...I mean...aren't you going to send me away with them?" he asked uncertainly.

"Oi, Harry. You aren't a parcel to be sent anywhere," Sirius shook his head, and Harry got the feeling he'd said something very wrong, something that upset Sirius deeply. His brow was furrowing oddly, and he almost looked like he might be ill himself.

"I'm sorry, Sir," he apologised quietly without really knowing what he was sorry about. He just knew that he'd messed up again, like he'd been messing up all night, and now Sirius was upset.

"No, none of that," Sirius sighed. "I think you've got this all wrong, Harry. I suppose that's to be expected. I'm rubbish at all this. I'm not the best to...but that isn't the point."

Harry just gazed at him, not at all certain what Sirius was trying to say.

"Stop apologising to me for things that are not your fault. This mess...it's not your fault, Harry. I'm upset, but not because of you. I'm upset because you deserved so much better than this, but that's not for you to apologise for."

"I...I don't understand."

"I suppose I ought to make this very clear for you. This is your home, Harry. For as long as you would like it to be. I have to tell your...James and Lily...about you being here, but you can see them as much as or as little as you choose. I won't allow you to return to the street, but you can choose where you want to live, whether it's with me or with them."

"I...I don't have to go?" he asked, daring to hope for the first time.

"I hope someday you'll want to. But until then, you have a place here, Harry," he said firmly.

"But what if they make me?" he protested.

"They won't," Sirius assured him.

"But what if-"

"Then I'll fight them for you, Harry."

It was a bold statement, but his voice did not waver. His pale blue eyes held strong, and something about his expression made Harry trust him. "But he's your best mate, you said," he whispered.

"Yes," Sirius nodded. "He is. But you're a boy, Harry. I know you've had to take care of yourself for far too long, but you ought to be taken care of. By adults. If you want to stay here and anyone tries to force you to do something different, I will stop them," he vowed. "Even if it's my best friend."

Harry took another sip of his tea to fight back the tears. No one had ever tried to protect him like this, and a foolish, silly part of him wanted to throw his arms around Sirius and never let go. He still couldn't understand why the man would be so nice, but maybe it had something to do with being his godfather. He still wasn't quite sure what that meant, but maybe it meant that Sirius cared about him and protected him from bad things. Maybe it was a little like having a parent, except it seemed even better because Sirius didn't have to do these nice things for him.

"Finish that toast, mate. If you turn sideways you'll disappear, and I'd rather not lose you just yet."

Despite himself, Harry grinned.

"You sealed off your Floo?" Remus asked with a bemused grin as he knelt in front of his office fireplace late that evening. It had taken quite a while to get through to Harry, but once he did, the kid actually grinned at him and ate two whole pieces of toast. Sirius talked him into another cup of tea, then noticed the drooping eyelids and sent his godson off to bed. Once the lights went out, Sirius paced the living room for the better part of an hour, waiting to be certain Harry was sound asleep before he called his friend at Hogwarts.

"I knew James would call," Sirius shrugged and adjusted his position to take the pressure off his knees. "It was too big a risk with Harry wandering about."

"He's going spare with worry, you know, made me promise you were all right."

"Oh Merlin," Sirius sighed and tried to stamp down the guilt rising to his throat. James Potter had put up with a lot over the years, offering his friendship, devotion, and protection when Sirius least deserved it. James was the one who pulled him back from the edge time and time again, and it felt awful knowing his friend was worrying unnecessarily. Plenty of times in the past, Sirius had given him reason to worry. Ironically, this was one of the few times Sirius was not the one anyone ought to be worried about, but he could hardly convince James of that without telling him the truth. "Don't tell me

more, Moony," Sirius begged. "I already feel like a great bloody tosser for doing to this to him."

Remus's face softened as he regarded his friend with compassion. Sirius felt vaguely comforted and knew Remus was the right person to call; James was his best mate, but Remus offered sage advice and exuded a sense of peace when a bloke really needed it. "You've done nothing wrong, Padfoot," his friend assured him. "Harry needed time. He comes first right now. Did you tell him?"

Sirius sighed again and contemplated the bottle of firewhiskey in the kitchen. He wondered how much one would need to drown himself in it. Probably at least two or three more...he shook his head, clearing it of suicidal thoughts. "Time may not fix this," he admitted wearily, thinking of Harry's screaming, his pleading, his poor battered hands. Sirius had seen a lot of things in his time, but nothing seemed so awful as his poor godson so scared and miserable that he literally bloodied himself in an effort to get away.

"He didn't take it well?" Remus questioned.

"He beat on the door until his hands were a mangled mess, then locked himself in his room and refused to leave even to eat."

Remus blinked in surprise. "Oh. Not well at all, then," he managed after a moment.

"No wonder you're a professor, with keen deductions like that."

"It was quite a shock, Sirius. With more time-"

"He woke up screaming a while ago. I've never heard such a sound, Remus. He made himself sick, then begged me not to send him away."

Remus's blue eyes darkened as his frown deepened. "That bad?" he asked worriedly.

"He's more damaged than we ever imagined, Moony," he responded gravely, shuddering as he remembered the scars on the boy's back. "Some bloody muggles beat him near to death, from what I can tell, and I'd bet my Gringotts vault they weren't the first or the last to lay a hand on him."

"Oh God," Remus breathed shakily, his face paling considerably.

"He doesn't want to see James and Lily. He wants nothing to do with them. He feels abandoned and unwanted."

"I suppose I can see..." Remus began carefully, then trailed off helplessly.

"I don't know what to think," Sirius admitted. "Why did none of us question it, Moony? He had just killed Voldemort. Why would we accept anything at face value that night?"

"It was all too improbable to believe. No one even thought it could be true at the beginning. To survive that...Dumbledore was the only one with any kind of explanation, and even he admitted it was pure conjecture," his friend reasoned. "We were all shocked, not to mention grieving."

"We overlooked facts," he countered sharply. "No matter how understandable, he's a 13-year old who was left to fend for himself. We were the ones meant to take care of him. It fell to us to question everything, to make absolutely certain."

"Dumbledore himself felt certain Harry was dead," Remus reminded him quietly. "You're right; Harry is only thirteen. He can't be expected to handle this calmly, but he'll see, in time, how much he is loved."

"If he'll see them at all."

"He'll have to, Sirius. James and Lily will have to-"

"I won't force him to do anything," Sirius cut him off vehemently, remembering that terrified look on his godson's face at the mere thought of being sent to his parents. Sirius might not fully understand it, and he still believed James and Lily were the best parents Harry could ever have hoped for, but if Harry wasn't ready, he wouldn't do it. He would not be the cause of that boy's pain, not even for James, not even for Lily.

"They're his parents, Sirius," Remus argued.

"And I'll tell them, but if Harry wants to stay, he stays."

"He needs parents, Sirius. If he's as hurt as you say, then he needs James and Lily. He doesn't need a best friend or a big brother."

"I'm his godfather, Remus. If something had happened to James and Lily he would have lived with me anyway. There's nothing I want more than for him to be home with them, but not until he feels safe. I promised him, Moony," he added. "He begged, and I promised."

"Sirius..."

"Listen, Moony. I'm his godfather. I love that boy. This is no game to me. He's scared out of his wits, and I will do whatever necessary to protect him. You would do the same for Lydia. You know you would."

"Of course I would," Remus conceded, "but James and Lily will be devastated."

"I know," he responded miserably, once again picturing that firewhiskey.

"You may be right about keeping him with you, but it won't be pretty, Sirius. He's their son."

"Yes, and I have to tell them he's alive and wants nothing to do with them."

"We'll tell them together, Padfoot," his friend vowed. "But we'll need a plan. They probably won't even believe us. Do you think he'll see them at all?"

"Perhaps," he sighed. "If I promise they won't take him away."

They discussed the logistics for another half an hour, forming their plan for springing the news to James and Lily. In the end, it was decided that Sirius would need to take a leave of absence from work, at least for a while. Harry couldn't be left here on his own, not yet, and if this was where he wanted to be, Sirius needed to be here to watch over him. They would wait one more day, giving Sirius the time to arrange for time away from the Ministry and to talk with Harry and hopefully persuade him to at least sit down with James and Lily.

Remus would find someone to cover his classes and come early Wednesday morning to meet Harry and to be here when James and Lily arrived.

"There's one thing we've overlooked," Remus said as Sirius once more adjusted his position as his knees screamed in pain from his uncomfortable position on the floor. "I'm ashamed to say I've forgotten about Lydia."

Another wave of guilt washed over Sirius as he realised he had forgotten her in all this mess as well. Harry didn't even know about his sister yet, and he would undoubtedly take it poorly. It would only further convince him he was unwanted; all this time, his parents had been raising another child instead of looking for him. He would be devastated when he learned, and Sirius wasn't sure he could handle it yet. And they would have to tell Lydia, as well. She could hardly be kept in the dark about her own brother, but it would break her heart that the brother she daydreamed about would loathe her very existence. She worshipped Harry, idolised him, and he would be nothing she expected.

"I haven't told Harry," Sirius admitted.

"I think he should know before he sees them. It will only be worse."

"I have a question for you, Professor."

"Yes?"

"How much firewhiskey do you suppose it takes to drown a man? Would three bottles do it, or would it be safer with four?"

Remus chuckled sadly and shook his head. "I must say, you've done remarkably, Padfoot. He must trust you, to want to stay with you."

"I've no idea why," he sighed. "It seems so unfair that he would choose me over them. I share in whatever fault James and Lily ought to have."

"You saved his life, Sirius," Remus answered solemnly. "That's powerful magic, and he's bound to trust you more than any other. You may very well be the first person he can ever remember taking care of him."

Sirius inadvertently thought of his own parents and the curses they threw his way. He thought of hidden bruises and the nights he woke screaming. He thought of lying in bed and wondering what would happen to him, what he would do if they hexed him before he could dodge, if their tempers flared and he was too injured to help himself. He understood, better than it most, what it meant to be alone with people who would hate and hurt you. He remembered mistrusting adults, suspecting everyone of a secret desire to harm you. But he had James Potter. The night he ran away from home, drenched from the rain, shaking and shivering, the door opened at the Potter's and his best mate embraced him. Though he knew it was unfair, though he wished it could be James or Lily standing in his place, he could understand why Harry wanted to stay.

"They'll hate me, Moony. If I keep him from them..."

"James and Lily will want whatever is best for Harry. If they know he wishes to stay, neither of them will force him to go. You must know that."

"I do," he agreed. "But they can still hate me. I'm stealing him."

"You saved their son, Sirius. Remember that," Remus said wisely. "The next days and weeks, maybe even months, will undoubtedly be difficult, but Harry is alive."

The sense of wonder in his voice reminded Sirius of Harry's face when he lit up the end of the wand. Yes, he thought, allowing himself to relax. Harry is alive, and so very wonderful. His godson had miraculously survived what no one should have survived, and he was home. No matter how terribly this went, nothing could have been worse than living the rest of their lives without him. As long as Harry was safe and alive, they would get through this. All of them.

A/N: Thanks to all my readers for your wonderful support thus far, and thank you for sticking with me through all these long chapters without the meeting you were hoping for. I have a feeling you will either love or hate me after this chapter...or possibly both. I tried multiple times to split this up and never quite got it, so I hope you're in for a long one. And I also hope it will hold you over for the next 10 days or so, as I have a massive project at work and will probably not be able to update until it's finished! Thanks to everyone who has read, reviewed, alerted, and otherwise been amazing!

WARNING: Adult language ahead.

Chapter 10

Harry was too tired for nightmares, but Sirius wasn't. They weren't even nightmares, exactly, but he slept strangely that night, haunted by swirling visions of James and Lily and Harry and Lydia. He dreamed of James tossing Harry in the air, and Lily creating sparkling shapes with her wand, and Harry taking his first steps as they all cheered, and Lydia giggling happily. And then he dreamed of the night he ran away from home, the night James sat up beside him not talking, not doing anything, just sitting and listening to Sirius breathe. He dreamed of that sure, silent friend, who was so rarely quiet but somehow knew what was needed of him that night. Next he dreamed of Lily and the light in her eyes the day she married James, the way she hugged him that day and whispered that she loved him, somehow assuaging all his fears of being forgotten and left behind.

James Potter embraced him as family when he was little more than a child, and when Lily Evans became Lily Potter, she accepted him as a brother, as her family. It was never questioned, never spoken of, always just assumed. They were family, in all the ways that mattered.

He woke feeling guilty and sick. His troubled conscience poked and prodded at his mind, forcing him to acknowledge what he managed to push aside until now. He could only abide by the wishes of a troubled thirteen-year old for so long. He had given Harry time, he had let him recover from his illness, he had eased him into the idea of parents and family, and he could no longer hide the secret from James and Lily. They deserved to be freed from the hell of mourning, even if it only caused brand new suffering. They deserved to know their son was alive, even if their son would not go with him.

Sirius would keep his promise to Harry; his godson wasn't going anywhere until he was ready, but he would not let another day pass with James and Lily kept in the dark. There was still the matter of Lydia, and he had to tell Harry before he could bring James and Lily here, but nothing would make any of this easier or less painful for Harry. His life was going to be a maelstrom of confusing, conflicting emotions for quite some time, and shielding him any further would probably do more harm than good.

The house was still quiet and dark, so Sirius dragged his weary bones from the bed and padded softly down the stairs to the fireplace. He called Remus first, requesting his presence this afternoon when he finished his classes. "I think you're doing the right thing, Padfoot," his friend said gently just before disconnecting.

"I hope so," he agreed uncertainly. "See you, Moony."

Before he made the next call, he crept back up the stairs to make sure Harry was soundly sleeping. He pushed the door open as quietly as possible and couldn't help smiling at the sight of Harry sprawled out on the bed, blankets all askew and arms akimbo. He stepped to his godson's side and adjusted the blankets, covering him up once more and resolving to do something about the horrid state of this room. Perhaps they could fix it up together, give Harry a little relief from the mental anguish he would undoubtedly endure today. Perhaps fixing his room up a bit would serve as a reminder that no matter what happened, he always had a place here with his godfather, a place of his very own.

The tug on his blankets did little to rouse Harry, and he shifted only slightly and exhaled deeply in exhaustion. With one last lingering glance, Sirius returned downstairs and stood in front of the fireplace for a moment, gathering every last bit of his Gryffindor courage. He wasn't quite sure he ever achieved it, but he forced himself to scoop a bit of powder out of the urn and tossed it into the flames.

Lily took a sip of her tea and gazed out her large kitchen window into the back garden. This weekend had felt so terribly long, and even now as things were supposed to return to normal, she felt unsettled and out of sorts. Staring out the window at her lovely garden, she thought of Harry once more and how excited James had been to teach him to play Quidditch. Before Harry could walk, James was

making plans to build a small pitch where he would teach his boy to play and spend weekends zooming about giving Lily tiny heart attacks.

They used the garden. James built his pitch. But it was for Lydia, not Harry, and today it just made her feel so bone-achingly sad. Perhaps it had been a mistake rebuilding in Godric's Hollow. Perhaps living here was making it harder for her to move on. Her son's death was never something she could move past, but it seemed easier in years past. Having Lydia here had helped, and now she was alone again in this house built on the ashes of the past. She felt a strange tugging in her chest since Halloween, and it left her with an ache that had mostly dulled over the years. With Lydia at Hogwarts and James at the Ministry, she was left alone here with memories of the child she lost, the child she'd been unable to save. It still haunted her remembering that night. If she had only been faster, if she had only woken sooner. He was there, just out of her reach, and she was too late.

"Lily?" her husband's voice called to her, and Lily started a bit as she realised he'd been saying her name.

"Morning, Love," she greeted him with a weary smile and joined him at the table for breakfast. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, frowning worriedly at her far away expression.

"Everything all right?"

She thought about lying, but she knew it would never work. They'd been married too long, and known each other since they were eleven. Fooling him was never a simple task. "Why is it so hard this year?" she asked instead.

"It's quiet," he shrugged. "It hasn't been this quiet since...since we lost him."

"Sometimes I think it was a mistake staying here," she shook her head. "We could have gone to the manor."

"You hate the manor," he reminded her gently. "Too big and too stuffy, you always said."

"But it wouldn't be the place where our son died. We walk past his grave every day. Do you think that's healthy?" she wondered.

James set down his tea and regarded her carefully. "What's this about, Lily? You've never said anything about this before."

"I don't know," she admitted with a sigh, feeling the tears sting her eyes as she gazed out to the garden again. "I don't know, I just...I feel him, James. I have since the anniversary. Like he needs me, or he's calling to me. It's strange. I've never felt this way before."

"Lily," her husband breathed painfully, quickly abandoning his seat and moving to embrace her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as he hugged her close. She inhaled the scent of him, so comforting and familiar, but the sharp pain did not fade. His touch usually soothed her, massaged away the hurts as she was reminded of his love and his loyalty, but for the first time since she was seventeen, it wasn't enough. She wanted her boy. She wanted her son. And she couldn't understand why twelve years later, it hurt just as bad as it did the night it happened. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she confessed.

"Nothing, Love," he murmured. "It was the anniversary, and Lyddie's at school. Maybe you should think about finding some work, something to do to get you out for a bit. Staying here all day can't be good."

"I know," she agreed softly, though a part of her wanted to argue that she was fine, that she didn't need a distraction. She had never been weak like this before, never so prone to emotional displays or moments of despair. This was all so new and strange, and she knew James was struggling, too. She didn't want to make it worse by forcing him to worry about her as well, but she couldn't seem to stop the tears. It felt like that first year all over again, and she hated thinking that, hated thinking that twelve years later she could still hurt just as badly as she right after he died. She had a beautiful life with a wonderful family, a husband who loved her more than anything, a daughter who was bright and vibrant and dear...she had everything a witch could hope for, except for her son. She told James it was enough, and she meant that. So why did she suddenly feel so lost?

"I'll stay home today," James offered. "We'll talk through it all."

"No," she protested, her stomach churning with guilt. He was already stressed and tired from worrying about Sirius on top of his own grief, and she hated for him to stay home to coddle her. "No, James, I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"I don't want to leave you like this."

"I'm just being silly. I'll go out," she promised. "Do some shopping, maybe."

James fixed her with a steady gaze, and she knew he saw through it. "You'll go back to our room and cry. Or to his grave," he countered quietly.

"James," she whispered.

"I've not done a great job with you or with Sirius. I don't know how to help either of you. But I'm not about to give up," he vowed. "Let me try. I feel so bloody useless."

She hugged him tighter and tucked her face into the spot between the slope of his shoulder and his neck. He sighed and rubbed his hands over her back, gently easing out a bit of the tension. "You aren't useless," she whispered. "I'd be in pieces without you."

"I'm right here," he promised and kissed the top of her hair.

She sighed into his shoulder and silently thanked the stars he was. She'd been proud in her youth, so sure she was somehow above the likes of James Potter and Sirius Black. To be fair, they had been too arrogant and taken nothing seriously, but when she finally saw a glimpse of the real James Potter and let down her guard, she started to understand a bit better. She saw James as he was, as the beautifully noble and loyal friend and son who bore the expectations of his elderly parents without complaint. She saw James as the fierce protector of a friend who deserved so much, a friend who had been beaten and defeated by his parents but never backed down. My boys, she thought wistfully and felt a fierce surge of love for her husband. He was far from perfect, but he would die before he would let anyone harm someone he loved. She was so fortunate to have claimed that first spot in his heart. They lost their firstborn and nearly

their sanity in the grief of it, but he helped her pull her life out of the rubble of their home. He stood beside her and helped her rebuild. How could she truly want to leave this place when it was such a testament to the love and strength of their marriage?

"I'll go owl Scrimgeour," James told her, stirring her from her thoughts as he released her. She nodded and cleaned up breakfast, no longer feeling any hunger.

While James retrieved their owl and jotted out a quick note, the Floo roared to life and glowed green for a brief second. She looked up in surprise, then nearly jumped out of her skin when she recognised Sirius in the flames. "Sirius!" she cried. "Oh, thank Heavens. Where have you been? We've been so worried!"

"I know, I'm sorry," he apologised sincerely.

"Padfoot?" James asked as he stepped back into the room.

"Lo, Prongs," he greeted with a bit of a sad smile. Lily frowned, not at all liking the look on his face or any of its possible explanations.

"I see you're still in one piece," James noted. "I suppose that's better than I expected after the ridiculous stunt you pulled. Honestly, mate, sealing your Floo?"

"It was...necessary, James," Sirius defended himself.

"Yes, yes, something very important, I'm sure, as Remus told me. Not you, mind you. Remus."

If she wasn't so desperately worried, Lily would have found James's jealousy hilarious. He could be quite possessive of the things he believed his, and though the friendship between the three remaining Marauders was an incredible bond, there was no denying the closeness James and Sirius had always shared. Sometimes Lily even felt a bit bad for Remus, that he was left slightly outside of it all, but then again, she knew the feeling. There was a friendship between the two of them that she would never know, but they both needed it, and she would never dream of interfering.

"James, I'll explain everything," Sirius promised. "I need you to come over today. Afternoon. When Remus is finished teaching. He'll be here as well."

The irritation slid from James's face, and Lily's heart rate increased at the tension in Sirius's voice. Something was wrong, and she really wasn't certain she could handle another tragedy right now. "What is it?" she asked worriedly. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Lily," he assured her patiently.

"Then just bloody tell us whatever it is you need to say!" James demanded.

"Come over," Sirius repeated. "This afternoon, I'll tell you everything."

"No," Lily protested. "You missed Halloween. You didn't speak to us all weekend. You can't just tell us we need to come over hours from now without any sort of explanation."

"I'm sorry," Sirius answered sincerely. "But everything is fine. This isn't bad news. I'm not hurt. Remus isn't hurt. No one is hurt," he promised. "I simply have something to tell you that won't be easy to tell you, and I'm fairly positive you won't believe me."

"Try us," James retorted wryly. "I doubt there's much you could tell us that would surprise us, at this point, seeing as I've been imagining you suicidal or completely mental or something equally awful."

Sirius hesitated for a moment, sounding pained. "I am sorry, James. Truly. This affects you more than me. I only want to make this easier on you."

"Spiffing job, mate," James scoffed irritably. "Haven't worried us a bit."

"Sirius, please," Lily implored. "At least tell us what this is about."

Sirius hesitated again and glanced strangely over his shoulder. "I...found something," he managed lamely. "Something important."

Something you ought to see. I'm sorry, I have to go. Come round about four, yeah?"

He was gone before they could respond.

Brilliantly done, Sirius, he thought miserably as he rose from the hearth to greet Harry, who had just joined him still looking half-asleep. He wasn't sure what he expected from the call to James and Lily, but that certainly wasn't it. He briefly thought about telling them, just to prepare them, but if he popped over through the Floo and told them their son was alive after twelve years, they would have stopped at nothing to drag him straight to Mungo's for extensive evaluation. They had to be here, they had to see him, or they would remain utterly convinced Sirius had lost his mind.

"Morning, Harry," he greeted his godson, trying to push his frustrations away so he could focus on Harry. Today was going to be awful for him, and dwelling in his own misery and self-loathing would do little for his godson.

"Good morning," Harry responded quietly, mustering a small smile.

"Go have a seat in the kitchen," Sirius instructed. "Kreacher will be starting breakfast. I have something I want to show you."

Harry nodded obediently and headed into the kitchen as Sirius went in search of a few pictures for his godson. He found several bundles tucked away in his room and plucked out a few favourites, smiling at the beaming face of Lydia Potter as she waved happily. Knowing Lydia, she would be the only Potter who took this all in stride. Lydia was very rarely sad, and the news that her brother lived would bring only excitement – and a new friend – into her life. Harry wasn't ready for such a vivacious bundle of energy just yet, but he had a feeling when he was finally ready to meet his little sister, she would work miracles on his fragile spirit. And she certainly wouldn't take no for an answer.

Armed with a small bundle of photographs, he joined Harry in the kitchen and shook his head in bemusement as Kreacher fussed over the tea he fixed for Harry and insisted that Master Harry have some toast while he waited for the veritable feast. Sirius took a seat next to Harry and set down the pictures, regarding his godson carefully to make sure he was ready for this. Thankfully, the moving pictures

piqued Harry's interest, and he automatically leaned in and widened his eyes in wonder. "It's moving!" he cried.

"Ah," Sirius chuckled. "I forgot you've never seen a proper wizarding photograph."

Harry picked it up and blinked a few times in awe and fascination as he studied the picture. It was a younger version of Sirius, beaming and grinning widely at the camera as he held his tiny godson. The baby nestled into his arms, and Sirius kept glancing down at the child and then back to the camera.

"You were just a few days old here," Sirius murmured, smiling fondly at the memory.

"That's me?" Harry asked in surprise.

"That's you," Sirius confirmed. "Look at that hair. A mess even then," he teased.

"You were born at home. Most wizarding children are."

"Were you there?"

"Yes, I was. You took a while to join us. You were a week late, and even then it took you quite a while. I kept your dad company while we waited for you. I think you wanted a lie-in...didn't bother to come out and meet us 'till nearly eleven in the morning."

Harry flushed a little, and Sirius set the picture aside and picked up another. This time it was James, dressed in his finest dress robes, standing next to Lily in her pure white wedding dress. It was the first time Sirius had really been able to compare Harry to James, and it was remarkable how much the boy in front of him resembled his father.

"Their wedding day," he told Harry quietly as the figures turned and kissed each other.

"Those are my parents."

"Yes," he nodded.

"They look..." he trailed off, but his pale, stricken face had Sirius wondering what he would say. Happy? Nice? Loving? They were all of those things, and he wanted so desperately to explain it all to Harry, but his godson abruptly took the picture and flipped it over so it was no longer facing them.

Sirius chewed slightly on his bottom lip, then grabbed the next picture and pushed it in front of Harry. In for a knut, in for a galleon, he thought wryly. This time, the picture was James and Lily again, but they had Lydia with them. It was the day before she was off to Hogwarts, and she had insisted on tying back her dark hair with a crimson ribbon – for good luck, she had said. Lily kept straightening the bow in the picture, and every now and then, James would give Lydia a little shove, prompting her to do the same and stick her tongue out at him.

"Lydia," Sirius said quietly.

"They...they have another kid," Harry breathed weakly.

"Yes," he nodded.

Harry just stared at the image of his sister, unable to speak.

"This is your sister, Harry," Sirius spoke again. "She turned eleven this year, and she's in her first year at Hogwarts."

"They didn't look for me," Harry whispered. "They just...they had her instead."

"No," Sirius countered swiftly, his voice firm and resolute. "That isn't what happened, Harry. No one could ever replace you."

Harry just shook his head, still staring at the photograph but obviously distraught. Sirius felt sick and miserable all over again as he imagined what Harry must be feeling. He already felt abandoned and betrayed by his parents, no matter how irrational, and now he discovered that two years after his loss, they had another baby and raised her. While he was being handed off from horrid family to horrid family, Lydia was growing up happy and loved and spoiled with the parents who had been his first.

"Your parents were devastated by your loss," he told Harry quietly. "It was hard for them, having another baby. They thought about you all the time, Love."

"They're happy. They love her," Harry protested.

"They do," he agreed. "Very much, just as they love you. But they didn't replace you with her."

"Are you her godfather, too?" Harry asked anxiously.

"No. No, Remus is."

Harry went quiet again and tore his gaze away from the photograph as he stared blankly across the kitchen. Kreacher was preparing a huge spread of food, undoubtedly attempting to smother poor Harry with it in hopes of cheering him. Sirius sighed and gathered up the pictures, then leaned over and lightly kissed the top of Harry's head.

"I'm telling them today, mate," he informed him gently. "I know it's all happened so quickly, but they have to know. You understand?"

"I don't want to go with them, Sirius," Harry lamented plaintively. "I don't want to see her, either."

"I know, and as I've told you, you don't have to. But they are coming over today, and I want you to think about something for me. They may not believe me when I tell them you're alive. It's been twelve years, Harry, and no one believed you were alive. If you think you can face them..."

Harry's head shot up as he looked to Sirius in a panic. "What?" he asked

anxiously. "I have to...you want me to..."

"I want you to do what you can," Sirius placated. "If it's too much, no one will be mad at you. Especially me," he promised.

"I...I don't know," Harry answered mournfully.

"I know you don't believe me, but your parents do love you, Harry. Very much. I understand why that's hard for you to imagine,

considering, but I promise that they do. You were their whole world, Love. Losing you didn't change that, nor did having Lydia."

"What if they don't care?" Harry asked quietly. "They have another kid now. I don't matter now."

Sirius sucked in a sharp, painful breath. "Harry," he murmured.

"I'm sorry, Sirius, I-"

"Shh," he hushed him. "Don't apologise. I just hate hearing you say things like that. You've no idea how wonderful you are, do you?"

Harry dropped his head, and Sirius reached over to ruffle his hair.

"You are loved," he whispered. "We'll work on it, yeah?"

"All right," Harry agreed uncertainly.

Kreacher made a little indignant noise, signalling that it was time to eat. Sirius sat back up and gestured for the elf to serve the meals. As expected, he had really outdone himself and began piling food on a plate for Harry.

"How about a little adventure today?" Sirius asked as they both started to tuck in.

"Adventure?" Harry repeated.

"That room of yours won't do I at all. If it's to be yours, we'll need to put your personal touch on it, won't we? And what good is that big closet of yours if you don't have proper clothes? We'll go buy some of your own so you don't have to wear my shrunken down pyjamas."

"But...I don't have money," Harry protested.

Actually, Harry had quite a lot of money, but they would save that particular revelation for later, perhaps. "You needn't worry about that, mate. I'm the only heir of a very old family, and I have more gold than I know what to do with," he quipped lightly. "I also have about a dozen years of holidays and birthdays to make up for. We'll make a

day of it," he offered. "And you can decide what you want to do about your – about James and Lily. Are you up for it?"

Harry glanced over, as though trying to determine his godfather's sincerity. After a long hesitation, he finally nodded. "All right," he agreed.

They finished eating, then Sirius shrunk down more clothes for Harry to wear out. They returned, hours later, with several large bags full of new clothes that would actually fit Harry and suit the weather. It was a struggle, at first, convincing Harry to try anything or stop fretting about prices. When he did finally relax, however, they had a completely brilliant day. Harry was just...remarkable. He was nervous and awkward at first, but when Sirius coaxed him out of his shell, they turned their shopping trip into a game into who could concoct the worst outfit. Sirius forced his godson to don ridiculous Muggle hats, and Harry selected garish colour combinations and nearly had them both rolling. It was good to forget, just for a while, all the things they would soon be facing, all the hurt to come.

After shopping, they still had an hour or so to work on Harry's rooms. After Sirius first charmed the walls an obscene chartreuse shade, Harry quickly begged for something more calm and normal, and they settled on a soothing blue. The black blankets and heavy velvet curtains were traded for a deep navy, and the room already looked brighter and more appropriate.

"This is brilliant, Sirius," Harry said happily as he surveyed their work. "Thank you."

"Of course," Sirius grinned and ruffled his hair. "Would you like tea?"

"Yes, please," he agreed quietly. Sirius started for the door, but Harry called him back. "Sirius?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yes?"

"I still don't want to go with them."

"I know, mate. And you don't have to," Sirius promised.

"I'll see them. If you want me to. I...I think I can do that," Harry said bravely.

"I know that you can. I promise it will be all right, Harry. Just remember what I told you."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "All right. Sirius?"

"Yes?" he asked patiently.

"Thank you. For today. It was...the best day I've had in a really long time."

"Me too, Harry. Me too."

When Lily and James they stepped out of the hearth just before four in the afternoon, Sirius was already waiting in the sitting room. Kreacher had set out cups of tea for each of them and bowed deeply to receive them. That alone was cause for suspicion; Kreacher hated Lily and James with a passion that nearly exceeded his hatred for Sirius. At least Sirius hadn't married a muggleborn. He usually voiced his disgust without hesitation, so the silent reception was quite ominous.

Remus emerged from the kitchen when he heard their arrival and claimed an overstuffed chair by the fireplace while Lily and James joined Sirius on the sofa. "You don't look ill," James remarked to his best friend. "But if you don't tell us what's happened in the next thirty seconds, you may bloody well start to."

Lily knew she should chastise him, but she didn't have the heart; she was ready to threaten Sirius herself. Despite seeing Sirius in the fireplace, she half-expected to find him at death's door when they arrived. Instead, he looked quite well. He was clearly a bit tired, as though he'd lost some sleep lately, but he didn't look nearly as haunted as he had in the past few weeks. His face was fraught with tension, but he seemed better, somehow, and it puzzled her even more.

"I'm sorry, James," Sirius apologised. "And Lily. I have something to tell you, and I suspect you won't believe me without the proof. I needed you to come here, and I've just needed some time to...get it all in order."

"Well, we're all here now," James growled impatiently. "So tell us."

Remus and Sirius exchanged worried glances, and Lily noticed that Remus shifted his gaze slightly up the stairs. She frowned in confusion, noting the way his brow furrowed before he quickly turned back to them. It seemed as though someone else might be here, but she hadn't seen or heard anyone, and who else could possibly be listening in?

"All right," Sirius sighed and looked directly at James. "Something happened on Halloween," he admitted.

"I knew it," James shook his head.

"It isn't what you think. Nothing happened to me. While you were at Hogwarts. I went out to the park as Padfoot to have a bit of a run, and I found someone – a boy – on a bench. He was sick and nearly frozen solid, so I brought him here to take care of him. I thought he was just a homeless Muggle boy, and then I found something...a scar. It was a curse scar," he explained tightly. "That's why I called Remus."

"That's what this is about?" Lily asked in confusion, feeling more lost than ever. "Why couldn't you tell James and me? I could have helped with the healing. We all could have."

"Because there was something else about him, Lil," Sirius answered softly. "Something I needed Remus to see before I talked to you. To either of you."

A slow, sick churning began deep in Lily's stomach. She didn't dare give words to the feeling, but her mind was suddenly flashing through all the possibilities. The secrecy, the insistence on keeping James away, the worried looks. And then there was that odd feeling she'd had the last few days, the tugging, the pull. It started that night and hadn't relented. It felt remarkably like the time she had hurried home to find her daughter nursing a broken wrist from a bad fall off her broom. It was a feeling only a mother could have, the sense that her child was somehow in need of her. But she had been with Lydia all weekend, and her daughter was understandably upset but certainly not in any harm.

It left one possibility. But no, it couldn't be. It just couldn't...

"The boy looked exactly like James," Sirius said quietly.

Lily felt her husband start a little beside her. "Like me?" he asked in surprise. But Lily couldn't join him; her mouth had gone dry.

"Just like," Remus agreed quietly. "Nearly identical to you at thirteen."

Lily nearly choked. "Thirteen?" she repeated mournfully, her heart breaking all over again.

"When he opened his eyes..." Sirius murmured, shaking his head a bit to clear away some bit of emotion.

"Don't," James suddenly cut him off. "Stop this. Right now. I don't know what sort of sick game the both of you are playing, but I'm done with this nonsense. Do you have any idea what we've gone through this week?" he demanded. "Our son died twelve years ago, and you bring us here to tell us about some kid who looks like my..." his voice broke, and Lily could see him crumbling under the weight of his grief. "My Harry," he whispered. "You bastards."

"We aren't playing, James," Sirius countered solemnly. "I understand what you're feeling. I-"

"You don't have a fucking clue what I'm feeling, Sirius!" he shouted angrily. "Do you know what I've been through? What Lily's been through? Does that even matter to you anymore?"

"Of course it does!" Sirius defended himself. "How could you ask me that? He wasn't my kid, but I mourned him for twelve years just the same! I know this is insane! I called Remus to tell me I was crazy, but he saw exactly what I saw! It's him, James. It's him. It's Harry."

James abruptly stood and continued his seething, but Lily remained rooted to her place and felt her blood running cold. It isn't true, a voice whispered. It isn't true. Your son is dead and you cannot believe what they are trying to tell you. It took you too long to live again when he died. You cannot go through that again.

Eyes swimming with tears, she looked desperately to Remus. Remus was always their voice of reason, always their strength and their calm in the storm. But now he was just sitting and doing

nothing, and she had never felt more betrayed or hurt. He might as well have lifted his wand to her, or ravaged her during a full moon. "Aren't you going to help us?" she asked accusingly. "Are you just going to sit here while he says this? How could you actually encourage him?"

"Because he's telling the truth," Remus responded quietly. "I performed the charm myself, Lily. We tested his blood. It's Harry."

"No," James shook his head furiously. "That's impossible. Sirius, you were there. You saw the house burn down in front of us with my son inside."

"We saw the house burn down," Sirius agreed. "But we only believed Harry was inside. None of us saw him after the fire began. You saw Voldemort, but not Harry."

"Because the flames were already too high!" Lily cried, suddenly hating him for doing this to her. She was still dreaming each night of her horrible discovery on Halloween. She kept waking up in a cold sweat with the images of the raging fire still fresh in her mind. She could see her baby boy's crib alight with flames. How dare he force her to think of it once more? "You weren't there to see that," she spat bitterly. "I saw him crib burning, turning to ash. I tucked my baby in that night, and I watched as fire tore apart his room where I laid him down!"

"Lily, please," Sirius begged. "I know you don't believe me, but I would never do this to you if I wasn't certain. I know what you saw that night, but I also know what you didn't see. Harry wasn't in the crib anymore. By the time you got to the nursery, he was gone. I've never heard of accidental Apparition, but somehow he's done it. It wasn't the only time in his life...when he's been frightened or cornered, his magic has been remarkably strong. I can't explain to you how it happened, but somehow he managed to Apparate out when the fire began. When you and James woke, Harry was already out of the house."

"That's impossible!" she argued. "He was an infant!"

"It was also impossible for an infant to stop Voldemort."

"What are you saying, Sirius?" James demanded. "You're telling me that my son is alive and you know where he is?"

"I'm telling you your son is here in my house."

Lily felt the blood drain from her face as the world spun crazily before her. No. No, it couldn't be. She would have known, wouldn't she? If Harry had survived that night, she would have known. She couldn't possibly have spent twelve years mourning a child that wasn't dead. Harry James Potter came into this world on July 31, 1980, and he was taken from it on October 31, 1981. He was wonderful and loved and he had died knowing that Mummy and Daddy loved him more than anything in the world. He was dead and gone and grieved every day, not alive and in this house. Not sleeping on park benches or slowly succumbing to hypothermia all on his own.

"No," James breathed. "No, this can't be true."

"The charms don't lie, James," Remus said carefully. "I performed Proles Revelio myself."

"It could be a trick," Lily whispered. "Someone who wanted us to believe he was alive...to hurt us."

"Lily's right," her husband agreed. "It was Halloween. The same day he...the same day he died. In a park near your home, Sirius," he stressed. "That couldn't be coincidence."

"I'm not suggesting that it was," Sirius responded meaningfully. "By all logic, Harry shouldn't have survived any of it. He shouldn't have survived Voldemort's curse, or the fire, or...any of it. But he did. There's powerful magic happening with him, and it brought him home."

"No," James shook his head once more. "I've heard enough of this. Lily and I have been going mad thinking about him and remembering him. The two of you are welcome to indulge in this fantasy, but I'm taking my wife home. I won't let you confuse and disturb us any longer. Our son died twelve years ago, and you're both bastards to try to convince us otherwise when you know it couldn't be true."

"It is true," another voice suddenly joined them. Lily's head jerked up to the stairs, and she saw a terribly thin boy with a mop of black hair and a pale face. He was trembling a little, and Sirius jumped up to join him. Lily thought she might collapse as Sirius placed a hand on his shoulder to keep him steady. "It's true," the boy repeated, his voice a bit more steady this time. "W-when I was eleven, an owl came to my window with a letter about Hog...about the school. The wizard school. It said my name was Harry Potter."

Lily had to close her eyes to fight the dizziness as she started to lose her hold on reality. For a crazy moment, she wanted so desperately to believe it. Of course she wanted to. Her son...her beloved, precious son. She wanted to believe there was a chance he had survived, that he had come home to her. This boy looked so much like James, just as she imagined her Harry would.

But the mind could play such terrible tricks. Perhaps the boy only looked like James because they wanted him to. Black hair was hardly uncommon, and green eyes perhaps more so, but not entirely rare. The scar looked like a curse scar, but it could easily have come from some sort of boyhood accident. The pain of losing Harry was so fresh for all of them, and the guilt they felt was overwhelming. It would be so easy to project their feelings onto this poor boy, to make him into someone he wasn't to assuage the guilt and calm the hurt. And the boy was clearly in desperate need of help. He was painfully thin, and the pallor of his cheeks spoke to his recent illness. His eyes were shadowed and his expression guarded; he clearly had been hurt before and survived on his own machinations. Going along with their delusions kept him warm and safe and well-fed, at least temporarily. He would probably say anything to stay here.

"My son is dead," she whispered. "It was a terrible tragedy, but he's dead. I'm very sorry for whatever you have been put through. We'll make certain you are well cared for."

"Lily," Sirius pleaded with her. "Look at him. This is your son."

Not even knowing what she was doing, Lily took a step forward. As soon as she did, the boy took an instinctive step back and glanced up at Sirius.

The look on his face nearly brought her to her knees. He looked at Sirius with an expression that was so entirely James, she knew this

could be no one but her son. He looked at Sirius through her eyes, but with a crinkle of the brow and a turn of the lip that belonged completely to James.

"Oh God," she whispered. "Oh my God. Harry."

But her son moved further still, and he looked to Sirius with obvious fear and trepidation. "May I go to my room, please, Sir?" he requested, his words oddly formal but his tone shaky and uncertain.

Her son was afraid of her. More than afraid, he was terrified. He didn't want to be in her presence, didn't want to look into her eyes. She had been without him for twelve miserable years, and now he was looking to Sirius for comfort and protection. She felt gutted, and frightened, and so, so terribly sad. Her Harry, her baby boy...

Sirius looked equally heartbroken at Harry's timid request, but he managed a smile and nodded. "Go ahead," he agreed. "I'll come up in a bit."

They all watched as he hurried up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms. Lily couldn't speak, couldn't formulate any words that felt appropriate after such a blow. It ought to be such wonderful news, it ought to feel like her wildest dreams coming true, but the air just felt thick and sombre and wrong. This wasn't how it should be. Her son should not be afraid or desperate to escape her. Her son should be overjoyed, just as they should, and there should be hugging and laughter and bliss instead of the heavy weight of silence. What happened to her boy to make him so afraid? Who wronged her son and turned him into this shy, quiet boy who would rather hide alone in his room than be hugged by the parents who loved him more than life?

James hadn't spoken since Harry appeared downstairs, and he did not speak now. He was staring blankly at the spot his son had been, his face disturbingly still. Lily cleared her throat and looked to Sirius, tears pooling in her eyes. "Where has he been?" she whispered.

"In a children's home, 'till he was five. Then with foster families. He ran away when he was ten."

"Ten?" she gasped, heart sinking even more. Her knees felt weak and shaky, and if not for the image of her son burned in her mind,

she might have just collapsed to escape the pain of it all. At ten, Lydia was a boundless ball of energy full of light and laughter. She was talkative and affectionate and completely comfortable with herself, always surrounded by her friends and blessed with the confidence of a child who knew she was smart and good and loved. At the same age, Harry had run away. What horrors did a ten-year old know that drove him from his home? "Where did he go?" she asked weakly.

"On his own for a bit, then he lived with some other kids, mostly older. That owl..." Sirius's voice faded as he ran his hands through his hair. It was a nervous gesture that seemed so out of place on Sirius that she wanted to scream. "I'm afraid the Hogwarts letter did him little good. It made the other kids frightened of him. They wouldn't let him stay after."

"No," she breathed. "Oh Harry. Why didn't he respond?"

"Would you?" Remus countered quietly. "Your parents were there, Lily. They had already been informed. All muggle parents are notified beforehand so they can help their child to understand. Harry was surrounded by muggles, but the Quill wouldn't have known that. And if it had..."

"Someone would have gone looking," James finally spoke up. "His name stayed on the list, but no one looks at those records. The Quill does its job, and McGonagall receives a list of muggleborn students. The proof was there all along, and no one bothered to look at it."

"No one could have known, James," Remus reminded him softly. "We all believed his name was taken from the list."

"We were so close," Lily whispered. "So close to finding him."

"We found him now," Sirius attempted to comfort, but his words sounded so hollow.

"So where did he go after that?" she had to ask, though she was quite certain she already knew the answer.

Remus and Sirius shared another troubled look, and Sirius looked to her with an expression of such pain she very nearly wanted to comfort him. But her heart wasn't in it. She felt too numb, too lost, to

be of any good to anyone now. Her son was meant to have the whole world. He would have, if he had stayed safe in his little home as they intended. He would have grown up as loved and cherished as Lydia, surrounded by his family and his friends.

"He took care of himself, Lil," Sirius answered. "He stayed in shelters, or places he found that were out of the weather."

"Why?" James demanded, an edge of danger in his voice. "Why would an eleven-

year old choose to live on his own instead of with families?"

"James," Sirius shook his head.

"Don't ask this now," Remus added. "There will be time later. The important thing now is helping Harry adjust."

"Tell me," James pressed. "Tell me what they did to him."

"This will help nothing," Remus countered. "Harry needs your support and understanding now, not your anger."

"But Harry doesn't want our support, does he?" Lily asked knowingly. "He moved away from me. He looked to you," she said to Sirius. She didn't want it to sound like an accusation, but her heart was pounding hard in her ears, and one word kept echoing through her mind: betrayal, betrayal, betrayal.

Sirius hesitated again, and Lily wanted to scream. She wanted to scream so loud and so hard that this rotten house collapsed with all of them in it. She wanted to scream so loud the whole world would know her pain. Because Sirius's look told her everything. I'm sorry, Lily, it said. Your son wants me and not you. Your son doesn't trust you. Your son has picked me.

"You must understand," Remus cut in, always running interference, always attempting valiantly to keep the peace. "Sirius saved Harry's life. It's natural that he should trust him."

There was nothing but stony silence, and when Lily gazed over at her husband, she could feel the rage seeping off of him. "We are his parents," he ground out, his voice low and gravelly and dangerous.

"He needs time, James," Sirius implored. "He will see, in time."

"You've known my son was alive for days, you fucking bastard."

"James!" she gasped in shock, acutely aware of Harry's presence just out of sight.

"Stay out of this, Lily," James demanded.

"I know you're upset," Sirius placated carefully. "I know I kept this from you, but he was terrified. I couldn't make it harder for him. You asked me once to protect him, and that is exactly what I did. Perhaps not perfectly, but-"

"You lied to me!" James shouted furiously, and Lily bit her lip as the tears streamed down her cheeks. Anger coursed through her in waves – anger at Sirius, for keeping their son from them, anger at herself, for not ever questioning his death – but it was tempered by overwhelming pain for her son and what sort of torture he must have endured.

"James," Remus spoke up again, attempting to intervene.

"And you," James spun on him. "How long did you know? You looked me in the eye while I was mourning my son and said nothing?"

"He was sick," Remus answered evenly. "We both wanted you here. You belonged here with him. But it was far too much for him, and we had to consider what would happen if he was pushed too far."

"You're here now," Sirius added. "In time, he'll understand and go home with you."

"We'll take him now."

"You can't, mate," Sirius shook his head. "I promised him."

"You promised him?" James laughed incredulously.

"James, please, stop this," Lily pleaded. She could see his grip on control fading before her eyes, and it was only a matter of time

before he took this too far. She was confused and conflicted and hurt, but there was nothing they could do now except focus on Harry and do what was best for him.

"What right does he have?" James roared. "That is our son, Lily! He has no right to promise him anything!"

Before Lily could stop him, James had gone for his wand. He pointed it directly at Sirius, breathing hard and obviously just daring his friend to retaliate. Sirius clearly appeared stricken, but for once, he kept his temper about him and merely shook his head. "Hex me," he offered. "Do it, if you'll feel better, but your son is upstairs, James," he reminded him. "Remember that."

James lowered his wand, but the look on his face was pure hatred. He stared at Sirius for a long moment, then spun on his heel and Disapparated.

Lily stood frozen, staring at the spot he had just been, expecting him to return at any moment. When he didn't, her knees began to tremble and she felt certain she would collapse. Sirius was at her side before she could, wrapping his arms around her and guiding her to the sofa.

"I'm so sorry, Lily," he murmured.

"Why doesn't he want to come with us?" she whispered. "Surely he knows that we would never harm him."

"Harry needs time before he accepts that," Remus explained gently. "It wasn't easy keeping this from you. From either of you. But Harry was fragile, and we thought it best to-"

"I don't care," she shook her head. "I wish...I wish we had known, but I just...I just want him back. What did those miserable people do to him? What could they do to make him frightened of his own parents?"

"It isn't just that, Lily," Sirius shook his head. "Harry...he thinks you abandoned him."

"We thought he was dead!" she cried.

"He's never felt wanted. He's been told all his life he's worthless. He can't see truth, Lily," he tried to explain. "All he knows is that he's lived all his life without anyone. The way he sees it, you should have known he was alive, or at least looked for him."

"But we would have," she protested weakly. "If we'd had any idea..."

"I know," he tried to comfort.

"We all know that," Remus agreed. "No one is to blame, but Harry isn't ready to accept that. In time, he will."

"Until then, I need you to trust me," Sirius implored. "He's terrified he'll be taken

from here. I've told him he can stay as long as he likes. He's safe here, and I'll take care of him. I'm taking a leave of absence from work, and I'll be with him until he's ready."

"Sirius," she whimpered, fresh despair sweeping through her at the thought of leaving without her son. She missed him for so long, and now he was here. Somehow, he was here, but he didn't even want her.

"I'll take care of your boy, Lily," Sirius vowed. "Take care of James. You know how he'll blame himself for this."

"I want Harry," she cried softly. "I want my son."

"He's safe," Sirius promised. "He's alive. Lily. Harry is alive."

"It's him, isn't it? It really is him. He's been out there...all this time..."

"It is," Sirius confirmed, and Lily felt Remus's hand touch her shoulder, joining them to provide whatever comfort he had. "He's remarkable, Lily. And he'll come round. You'll see. He needs time, and then he'll be home with you. Where he belongs."

"Tell him I love him," she pleaded. "Please, Padfoot. Tell him."

"I will, Lily. I will."

It took all of her strength to step out of the embrace and step towards the fireplace. Her son was upstairs, and the frantic pull finally made sense. Her baby was alive and in distress. Except he didn't need her. He needed Sirius. He was afraid of her, distrustful. He didn't know how much his own mother loved him, how she would have gladly stepped in front of any curse for him. He had no idea how greatly he was missed or how she had felt lost and empty without him. He thought she abandoned and betrayed him, and the grief was almost more than she could bear. Her relief at finding him alive, any joy she should have felt was swallowed up in the knowledge of his suffering and the fact that it continued still. And she was helpless to stop it. This was her child, her firstborn, her beloved little man, and she could do nothing to soothe him, to promise him he was so very loved, so very wanted, so very special.

She wanted to run to him and wrap him up in her arms and never let him go. She wanted to cling to him and feel his heartbeat and be assured that this was real, that her baby had truly been returned to her, restored to life after so many years of missing him. She wanted to breathe in the scent of him and run her fingers through his hair and hug him until he believed that he was the most precious thing in the world to her.

But she could do none of that. She had once held him to her chest when he cried and been the centre of his world, but now he was afraid of her. All she could do was wait and hope that Sirius was right, that someday Harry would understand.

With the weight of the world bearing down on her chest, she reached for the Floo powder and willed herself to walk away. James needed her now, and it was all she could do to keep going.

A/N: Thank you sooooo much for your support and for being patient with a bit of a longer wait this time around! Happy Valentine's Day! I hope everyone is spending it with the ones they love.

Chapter 11

Harry was sitting on his bed staring blankly at a book Remus had given him and thinking of the awful mess downstairs. He was desperately trying to put it out of his mind, but the faces of his so-called parents were haunting him, as were Lily's whispered words to him. She is not your mother, he reminded himself. She left you for dead, she didn't care about you.

But she had looked so concerned. And her eyes...they really were just like his, and they had looked so terribly sad. She looked like she was probably a good mum, at least to Lydia. She seemed warm and kind and nothing like he imagined when he thought of a woman who abandoned her infant son. But that was exactly what she had done, and he would not be deceived by her. He knew how to take care of himself, and Sirius was the one to trust. Sirius was the one who saved his life, who took care of him, who had given him this room and this bed and the fine new clothes. It was Sirius who would never let him go, Sirius who would keep him here so he would never be cold or hurt again.

Even as he tried to remember all of this, he thought of James's words, his insistence that his son was dead. James Potter did not want to consider that Harry might still be alive. He had been determined to leave without even seeing Harry, without even considering it. How could you let me go? he thought miserably. Why does Sirius love me and you don't?

In an unwonted fit of anger and frustration, he took the book Remus had given him and chucked it at the wall. Of course, he did that just in time for Sirius to open the door and peek in, his eyebrows raising as the book flew across the room. Harry instantly felt a rush of shame; Remus had generously given it to him this afternoon even though they hadn't met yet. He had rather liked the man, who had kind eyes and a gentle spirit, and now he'd just tossed his book like it was worthless, and worse, Sirius had seen him do it. It would earn him a thrashing anywhere else, but Sirius only seemed mildly curious.

"What did that book ever do to you, mate?" he teased gently.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

Sirius retrieved the book from the floor and set it at the end of Harry's bed. "You know," he began after a long moment, "I had this book once that had big sharp teeth. It growled at you if it was angry."

Harry looked up, startled. Surely that wasn't what Sirius was here to talk about, and...well, he had to admit he was a little curious about the book. "It had teeth?" he asked quietly.

"Books at Hogwarts do all sorts of amazing things," Sirius nodded and cautiously sat down on the edge of Harry's bed, as though waiting to see whether that would be tolerated. Harry just scooted over a little to make more room, though he felt himself tense just a little at the nearness. Sirius clearly didn't mean to hurt him, but he couldn't help it. That was just instinct. Sirius noticed, but he said nothing. "I reckon when you get there, you'll attempt to sneak into the Restricted Section of the library as we used to do. Always for research, mind you."

Sirius's eyes twinkled a little, so Harry knew it wasn't real research. "What's in the Restricted Section?"

"The sorts of things that shouldn't fall into irresponsible hands," his godfather answered with mock solemnity.

Harry couldn't help snorting just a little. "Like yours?" he accused.

"You've just made a joke, mate!" Sirius grinned, and Harry felt his cheeks colour. With a soft sigh, Sirius reached over and ruffled Harry's hair a bit. "You did very well, Harry," he said quietly.

Well, that was a lie, Harry knew. He hadn't done well at all. He'd gotten nervous and called him 'Sir,' even though he wasn't supposed to. He'd been frightened of James and Lily, frightened by their expressions, and he wanted to get away without being hurt by anyone. Automatically, he reverted to the formal tone he was used to with adults, and it was embarrassing. "I called you Sir," he grumbled.

"How many days have you been here, Harry?"

"I don't know. A few."

"Exactly. Only a few," Sirius answered meaningfully. "You've had nothing but trauma and surprise."

"Earlier today...that was fun."

"Yes, it was," his godfather smiled. "But you aren't expected to be perfect here. And you did a wonderful job. You came downstairs all on your own and said what you needed to say. I'm proud of you, Harry."

Harry flushed again and stared down at his navy blue comforter, finding a loose thread that seemed utterly fascinating at the moment. "Are they very mad?" he finally asked after they were silent for a few minutes.

"At me, perhaps."

"You didn't do anything."

"That isn't how they see it. I'm taking you away from them. But that isn't for you to worry yourself over."

"They don't care," he shook his head. "They didn't even want it to be true."

"Oi, mate," Sirius sighed wearily and rubbed at his temples. "I think you're going to hear whatever it is you want to hear, no matter what your mum and dad are actually saying."

Harry frowned a little at this, not understanding. "What do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

"You've been through too many difficult times, Harry. I think perhaps," he said carefully, and looked over at Harry as though he might break. "Perhaps those things have made it harder for you to accept certain...truths."

"What truths?" he frowned again. He didn't like when people talked in riddles like this. He wasn't very good at solving them.

"Like how much you are loved. How much you have been missed."

Harry felt his mouth go dry. "It's not true," he whispered. "They didn't. They only made you think..."

"Harry," Sirius silenced him, and his expression made Harry's stomach churn a little with guilt. He looked old, really, and so tired. "We don't have to talk about this right now."

"There's nothing to talk about," he shook his head. "You said I could stay. You promised."

"I did," Sirius nodded. "And you can. Of course you can. But someday you will understand, Harry, that you have been loved and missed every day. You will see how much you mean to your mum and dad, and I think you'll want to go with them."

The familiar sense of panic bubbled up in Harry's throat. He had been fine before, and he would be fine again. He didn't want to return to the streets, but he had done all right for himself. It wasn't easy or fun or comfortable, but he was resourceful and he knew it. Over the last few days, his weariness and his confusion and his fear had left him small and weak and afraid, but he knew he could do what it took to survive. Now that he was recovered and building back his strength, he could take care of himself once more. And he knew about magic now, wasn't so afraid of his own ability. He could use it for good, use it to protect himself. If Sirius tried to make him go with Lily and James, he could escape and take care of himself once more.

But he didn't want to. He wanted to stay here. Sirius was kind, and he made him laugh, and nothing had to be so hard here. "What if I don't?" he asked quietly, raising his eyes to challenge the man. "Will you make me leave then? You'll let me stay, but if it's too long and I don't change my mind, you'll-"

"How long did I tell you that you could stay?" Sirius cut him off.

"You said..."

"How long, Harry?"

"As long as I wanted."

"Precisely. I will never give up on hope that you'll come to see how much your parents care, but I will also never make you go where you don't want to go," Sirius promised. "All right?"

"All right," Harry agreed.

"Good boy. How about something to eat? We haven't had supper yet," Sirius reminded him.

Harry's stomach felt too in knots to eat right now. "I'm not hungry," he shook his head.

"Rest a little, then. But you'll need to eat after, all right?"

"Yes," he nodded obediently.

"I'll be here if you need me." He ruffled Harry's dark locks again and tugged the blanket up over him.

"Sirius?" he asked as his godfather started to exit the room.

"Hm?"

"I...I don't want to see them anymore. Not right now."

Sirius's face fell a little, but after a long moment, he nodded. "If that's what you'd like," he said quietly.

"Yes, please," he managed, hating himself for making Sirius sad but knowing he couldn't face them again. Not yet.

"Get some rest, Harry."

Sirius murmured a quiet spell to darken the room, and Harry slipped beneath the covers and begged his mind to spare him from the nightmares.

James didn't hear the fireplace roar to life as his wife arrived back home. His thoughts were a racing muddle of nonsense, his mind torturing him with images of his boy, his son, staring at him with that look of fear and distrust. He pictured that frail, skinny boy shaking and freezing on a park bench, waiting for death to claim him and

knowing there was no one to save him, no one to love him, no one to hold him and promise the pain would end soon. He thought of that baby who had loved him so simply and so purely grown up into a starved boy without a roof over his head or food in his stomach. He imagined that child growing up, in and out of foster homes, and imagined the horror it took for a ten-year old to run away, to choose the streets rather than a home.

He had ruined everything, and now, he would complete the destruction of his life. This house – this stupid, fucking house! – that he had rebuilt in some sort of demented tribute to his son, some way to be close to him, a sign that they would never forget. But they had forgotten, hadn't they? They abandoned him, just as they feared they would. While they cried and mourned and rebuilt the house, their very living son continued in this world alone.

He built this house to be close to his son, to be near that stupid sodding headstone with its stupid sodding sentiment. How false it must all ring to Harry. How utterly empty and meaningless their misguided honour. Here in this house, they were so far away from Harry that he was alone and forgotten in the world, starving, bleeding, freezing, hiding.

Sirius saved him from actually freezing to death. Without Sirius, a thirteen-year old boy would have died a slow, painful death, his mind eventually numbing him to it all as his heart slowed and his breathing ceased. When they found him, he would have been barely more than a block of ice, a once-living child now turned to stone because his loving parents were too blind to see the truth, so consumed in their own grief that they overlooked facts and allowed their child to vanish.

How could he have done it? How could he have stopped Lily from running into that nursery twelve years ago? So what if they had perished in the flames? It would have been better than this. Harry would have taken comfort in his parents dying for him, and now he would forever know that they had been cowards. They were so afraid of seeing him burned up that they turned away from that empty room and spent twelve years believing he had died there. What kind of parent didn't look? What kind of parent could just accept death so easily? Harry was an infant. Harry wasn't supposed to die. Harry shouldn't have been sacrificed for them, and a real

father, a good father would have charged into that room and searched through the ashes until he knew for sure.

He had been afraid. He had been overwhelmed by grief. He saw Lily trying to run into certain death, and he had stopped her because he was scared to live without her. He sacrificed Harry so he could have his wife, and he wished he was dead. For the first time in his life, he quite sincerely wished he had been hit by an Avada Kedavra or taken a fatal fall off his broom or bled to death in a werewolf attack. Anything would be better than this. Anything would be better than failing his son so splendidly.

Harry would never forgive them. Harry would never, ever understand how miserably sorry he was. Harry only knew he was abandoned, but he would never understand how James would have died a thousand times over for him. In the moment that mattered, he had been too weak to save his boy. His intent did not matter. His love for Harry did not matter. His willingness to bleed himself dry would mean nothing to the child who had only known hate and fear and hunger and pain because of his spineless father.

With a cry of sheer anguish, he raised his wand without thinking and cast a Blasting Curse at a lamp. It exploded in a satisfying burst, and the rage gave way to cold determination. A blessed numbness washed over him, relieving him of the guilt and the grief and the worry and the envy. He did not think of Harry looking to Sirius, he did not think of Sirius giving the boy permission to escape. He did not think of that look in Harry's eyes or the pallor of his face or shadow of fear that seemed to haunt him. He thought of his singular goal of destruction and aimed his wand again. "Confringo," he called out clearly.

"Stop it!" Lily screamed as he exploded another lamp. "What are you doing?"

"Go away, Lily," he demanded, not even recognising his own voice. It was so cold, so angry, so full of a foreign hate that he had never felt before, even when he thought his baby murdered and taken from him forever.

He aimed his wand at a table and uttered the curse, watching the wood go flying. Lily ducked to avoid a piece of it, but he did not even flinch.

"James!" she screamed.

"Go away," he repeated. "You'll get hurt."

Another explosion, and this time he felt the heat on his skin and the sharp sting as a piece of wood scraped his face. "James, please!" she begged him. "You've hurt yourself! You're bleeding!"

"I don't care. Get out of here. Go," he demanded.

"You're destroying our home! Stop it, James! Just stop!"

"This place is a lie!" he shouted back at her as he blasted a door off its hinges. "It's all a filthy sodding lie!"

"James, please stop," she pleaded with him through sobs. Any other time, he would have been broken by her tears, broken by being the cause of her pain, but he was oblivious to it now. All he knew was the failure of his own wretched life, and if Lily knew what was best for her, she would turn around this instant and never look at him again. He deserved that, wanted it, even, wanted to feel as cold and alone and abandoned as his son had felt for twelve years.

He wouldn't rest now until he had destroyed it all. This happy home where he had tended to his wife and little girl while his son begged for food and shelter, this lovely, safe little place where Lydia's tears had been soothed while Harry cried himself to sleep on park benches. Maybe someday his son could come to this place and know that his father was paying the price, know that James Potter would never allow himself to forget the sins he committed against his own precious boy. This ruined house would be a tribute to him, a way of showing him their agony and their remorse. He may never believe them, but he would see with his own eyes that James hated himself every bit as much as his son now hated him.

"James!" Lily cried for him again as he blasted a hole through a wall.

"He's right to hate me, and now he'll know I hate myself." He aimed this time for a picture frame, not care a whit as he blasted apart a picture of himself with his wife and beautiful daughter. He had been so proud of it once, his beautiful little family, his two beautiful girls. He was so proud of the life they managed to create out of the rubble

of that Halloween, proud that they climbed out of their despair and back into life. He was so proud that he had survived that pain and become a good father to Lydia, the kind she could talk to, the kind she turned to when she was upset, the kind she loved to play with and read books with and hug as they listened to the wireless together.

But the picture was mocking him now, mocking him with their smiles and their hugs. Harry had never known a kind touch, and it was all his fault. What right did they have to smile and laugh and joke without Harry? What right did he have to be proud of anything when he as good as abandoned his son to a life of abuse and neglect?

"He's scared and confused, James!" Lily tried to reason with him. "As much as we are right now! Don't do this," she pleaded. "Please, I need you, James. H-Harry needs us now. We have to show him. Show him how much we love him and how much we grieved him."

"Grief?" he asked incredulously, whirling around to face her for the first time. "You think Harry wants our grief? Do you think he wants to know that we missed him so much we didn't even look for him?"

"James," she whispered, tentatively stepping closer, hands outstretched to calm him. "He'll understand. We'll make him understand."

"There's nothing to understand," he shook his head furiously. "For twelve years, I've wallowed in my pain. Twelve years, Lily. Twelve years of feeling sorry for myself while my son was starved, beaten, and frozen!"

He aimed another curse, this time destroying the replica Quidditch set she bought him on their anniversary a few years ago. She had it specially made in Gryffindor colours, and the little players zoomed around and shouted to one another. He hated it now, and he never wanted to set his eyes on it again.

"James, please. Please listen to me. This was not your fault. What happened to him was not your fault. Harry is angry and hurt right now, he feels abandoned because he doesn't know how else to feel!" she cried. "But you are his father. His dad, James, and he needs you. He doesn't know, but he does. He always has. We will

convince him. We won't give up on him. If you turn away from him now, think of what it will do. It will only reinforce what he believes."

"It's too late," he shook his head.

"Yesterday it was too late," she countered. "Today we have all the time in the world. Don't you see, Love? We have a second chance with him."

"You knew, didn't you?" he asked quietly, feeling the rage trickle out of him as it was replaced by overwhelming despair. He felt himself crumbling under the weight of it, and he was suddenly so tired. More tired than he had ever been in his life.

"Of course I didn't!" she protested.

"You said that you felt him," he whispered as tears formed in his eyes. "I didn't, Lily. I didn't feel anything."

"James, don't do this."

"That night, I stopped you. You wanted to go to him. I held you back, Lily. I wouldn't let you go in there."

"You were saving my life. And my sanity. If he had been there, I would have turned my wand on myself after seeing that. You knew that and you saved me."

"But he wasn't there. He wasn't even...God, Lily, I destroyed him. This is all my fault. It's mine, completely. I was afraid of losing you, too."

"That isn't a crime, James," she whispered. "We needed each other."

"What about Harry? What did he need?"

"We can't go back," she shook her head. "We can't change what happened or what we did before. We have to show him now how much we love him. Destroying the house won't help."

"Nothing I do will ever be enough to fix this. I need him to know, Lily," he implored. "I need him to know how bloody sorry I am."

"He's been hurt, James. He doesn't need apologies, he needs a family. He needs the mum and dad who have loved him since we first found out we were having a baby. He needs his mum and dad and his baby sister."

The reminder of Lydia sent him to his knees. He collapsed right there and buried his face in his hands, hating himself so much for what he had become. What was he going to tell Lydia? Just a few days ago, he had been reassuring Lydia of her brother's love for her, how proud he would be of her. She was so sweet and so thoughtful planting that flower in memory of him, but Harry would not be touched by the sentiment. In all likelihood, Harry wouldn't want to see her any more than he wanted to see them. How could he tell his daughter that? Harry had lived all his life without a father, but Lydia...Lydia was Daddy's Girl. Lydia thought he could do everything. And now she would see his failure, his cowardice. Now she would see that because of him, she had been deprived of a brother.

What would it do to her to have her illusions shattered at eleven? What would it do to her that the brother she worshipped, the brother she made up stories about, the brother who was meant to love her, wanted nothing to do with her? All those terrible things she said just days ago about not being a good enough sister...her worst fears would be true.

Wasn't it enough to ruin one child's life? Wasn't it enough that his son hated him? Now his Lulu would as well. She would look at him with disgust instead of adoration, and he could not bear the thought.

"James," his wife whispered as she knelt down next to him. "When we lost Harry, I thought I would never feel happy again. I thought I wouldn't be able to climb out of bed each day. You were the one who saved me from that. We saved each other," she reminded him as she reached for his hands. But he batted them away. He did not want her touch, not now. "James," she continued, undeterred. "You aren't allowed to give up like this. We've never let each other before, and we can't do it now. We have to think of Harry and Lydia."

"I am thinking of them," he countered. "And how much more they deserve."

"Voldemort did this to us. It wasn't you, it wasn't me, it wasn't Sirius. He attacked us, and nothing that happened after could be our fault. Please listen to reason," she begged him. "Let's just go lay down. We'll rest and we'll talk, and we will figure out the next step."

"There is no next step. Harry is safe and cared for. We chose Sirius for a reason, and now Harry's picked him."

It still made him feel cold inside, but the bitter rage towards Sirius was rapidly transforming into resigned acceptance. Sirius betrayed him, but only to do right by Harry, only because he knew what James was unwilling to face in that moment. He dared to stand there and raise his wand against the man who rescued his son, all because he was angry, all because he wanted Harry back even if Harry loathed him, as well he should.

He was a miserable arse, and Harry was right to pick another.

"I love you, James," Lily told him, "but if you ever dare to suggest that we just let our son go again, you will not sleep under this roof," she threatened.

He didn't know he was planning it until she said it. As soon as she did, he knew exactly where he was going. The picture formed perfectly in his mind, as though it had been his plan all along. "I'm going to the manor," he announced. "I don't want to be here."

Lily sucked in a deep breath, then nodded. "All right," she agreed. "We'll pack our things and go there."

"No," he shook his head. "I'm going to the manor."

She grew suddenly silent and still. "What?" she finally asked.

The hurt was practically dripping from her voice, and he felt a wave of remorse for causing her pain. He had been the source of her distress many times in the past, but never so intentionally. And no matter how angry and upset he was, it still went against everything he ever believed in to do that to her. "For the night, Lily," he attempted to appease, though he inwardly knew it may be much, much longer than that. "I need...time."

"You shouldn't be there alone," she argued quietly. "I don't want to be here alone, either. Not after this. Just take me with you. It's big enough. We can...we'll have different rooms," she offered.

They had never gone to bed angry with one another. The only time they did not fall asleep in the same bed was when he was away for work or with Sirius and Remus at the full moon. No matter how badly they fought, she had never banished him to the sofa or forbid him to sleep in their bed. They had always kissed each other, murmured words of love, and fallen asleep right next to one another. Offering to sleep apart, in another room...she was trying. Merlin bless her, she was trying. "No," he whispered. "I just need...it's only one night, Lily."

"Right," she breathed and forced a weak smile, even though he could see the tears she was holding back.

James Potter, you are a miserable father and a terrible husband, he scolded himself. "We'll fetch Lydia this weekend. I don't want to take her from classes."

"Yes, that's...reasonable."

"Lily..."

"Just go now, James. Go if you want to."

He nodded and stood, making his way for their bedroom at the top of the stairs to pack up his things. He heard his wife's quiet crying, but he forced himself to think of Harry, to think of that expression on his face. He didn't deserve to be here, and he could offer his wife nothing right now. Bags packed, he turned on his heel and Disapparated.

A/N: So I'm going to confess something. There is a lot of angst to muck through. It isn't all going to be angst, but there isn't going to be a quick and easy resolution through this mess. It's going to be a gradual process, and I know it may get exhausting, but such is life, I'm afraid, and such is this fic! I know some of you may be getting weary of it, so I thought I'd tease a few things: (1) SNAPE. He is in fact coming soon. And I really think Snape lovers and haters alike will find something to enjoy about his part. (2) ANSWERS. Why did Lily and James survive? It's the question no one has asked, and it's a HUGE part of this story. (3) REUNIONS. I've told some people in review responses that there was a particular chapter that was the first one I wrote and is still my favourite. Hang in there, and thank you so much for sticking with this roller coaster (and this terribly long author's note!). Much love to all!

Chapter 12

Remus was acting decidedly peculiar, Lydia decided. Her godfather was always a bit odd, a bit more quiet than her father and Sirius and haunted by his own secret. For as long as she could remember, Lydia had known her godfather was a werewolf. It was a secret here at Hogwarts, one she had been lectured many times not to reveal, even to her best friend, but it had never bothered her. Remus was one of the nicest people she had ever met, and her parents raised her to never be afraid of him. He took a special potion that helped him with the transformation, making it less painful and allowing him to keep his own mind. Remus had never let her in the room when he became a werewolf, but she knew she had nothing to fear.

It was brilliant having her godfather here at Hogwarts, and it comforted her a great deal when her mum kissed her goodbye and her dad hugged her tight before putting her on the train. Remus had always been a part of her life, and it was a bit like having a piece of home here at school. Uncle Sirius was fun, too, and far more willing to let Lydia break rules, but he'd stepped aside and let Remus be the bigger influence on her life. She loved them both dearly, but it was no secret that her bond with Remus was far closer.

Remus was a wonderful professor. He was a favourite of almost all of the students, and he taught Defense with more enthusiasm than any of her other professors. He always went out of his way to make sure they understood, and he was kind to everyone. Since she was his goddaughter, Lydia was allowed to go to his private quarters for

help with any of her homework, and he had tutored her in several of her other subjects. On weekends they had tea together and talked about their weeks, and if she had a particularly hard day, he always owed her to come visit for hot cocoa.

But suddenly, Remus wouldn't even meet her eye. He had been acting strangely all week, becoming a bit terse with students and assigning far more reading than ever. It wasn't the week of the full moon, so she had no idea where his foul mood had come from. Nor could she ask him, since he seemed to be avoiding her. That might be normal for Uncle Sirius, who sometimes disappeared for a bit in one of his "moods," as her mum called them, but never for Remus. Remus was always even and steady, and she couldn't even remember a time he had yelled at her or used a harsh word she hadn't strictly deserved. Oh, he could deliver a fine lecture when she had broken the rules, but Remus was a great master at guilt and making her feel bad without raising his voice. By the end of his lectures, she was always in tears.

If she thought about it, she could trace his odd behaviour back to Halloween, when he had disappeared to talk to her Uncle Sirius. He joined them for dinner the next night, but he had seemed a bit nervous. Her mum asked him several times if he was all right, but he just smiled and assured her that he was.

When the week started, he didn't begin class with a practical lesson. He delivered a long lecture with entirely too much note-taking, then hurried to his office the moment class was over instead of lingering to answer questions. The next day was more of the same, except he had yelled at several students and given detention for talking out of turn. Lydia herself had been at the end of one long, withering glare that made her swallow hard and wonder just what was happening to her mild-mannered godfather.

On Wednesday, Professor Snape taught Defense. Her stomach sank when she walked in, both because she was worried about Remus and because Professor Snape hated her. The chances of escaping two classes with him without a detention...well, Lydia had better ready herself for having her evenings occupied for a while.

Remus returned on Thursday, looking tired and worn, and Lydia stayed after class hoping to speak with him. "Hi, Remus!" she greeted him once the other students had trickled out of the room.

Normally she called him by his title, but he had given her permission to address him casually as long as no other students were around.

"Lydia," he greeted wearily, and she noticed he wasn't looking at her. "I heard you received detention with Professor Snape yesterday."

"You know he hates me, Remus."

"I know that mouth of yours frequently earns you detention, Lydia, and I'm very disappointed that you would act out in this class with a substitute professor," he snapped.

Remus never snapped, and she felt stung. "I didn't do anything that bad!" she protested.

Remus tutted a bit, but still refused to look at her. His brow was creased with worry, his eyes were dark and shadowed, and her heart suddenly skipped a beat. What if something was wrong? He was gone yesterday, but he didn't appear to be ill. Uncle Sirius had acted funny and refused to come eat dinner with them, and he hadn't responded to her thank you letter. So it could be him, couldn't it? Something could have happened to him, only Remus didn't want to tell her yet. Or worse, what if it was her parents? Her dad was an Auror...what if something happened to him at work?

Before she could ask him, he was lighting into her again. "What I don't understand, Lydia, is how many times you will be punished for the same offense before you decide to change your ways. Merlin knows your father got into a fair bit of trouble in his day, and I was often a willing participant. But our pranks never interfered with our school work. You don't pay attention," he scolded. "Do you expect your grades will be adequate if you are not listening? Or worse, what if you make a mistake in Potions? Or in this class? It could be dangerous, Lydia."

"Remus, all I did was talk to Annie at the beginning of class. It was only for a minute!" she argued. Really, this was nothing to be upset over, and she didn't understand why her godfather was being so mean. He had never, ever been mean to her!

"What about your parents, Lydia? Do you expect that this is easy for them, receiving owls every week about your behaviour? This is the last thing they need right now!"

Her stomach clenched again, and in spite of herself, she felt her lower lip beginning to tremble – a clear indicator that tears were on their way. "W-what do you mean?" she asked nervously. "Did something happen to Daddy? Or Mum?"

Remus finally looked up and seemed oddly stricken. "What?" he asked sharply. "No – Merlin, no, Lydia, nothing's happened to your parents."

"You're being really weird!" she accused. "You never yell at me! And you were gone, and I just...do you promise they're all right?"

There was some hesitation before he nodded. "Your parents are all right," he confirmed. "And you needn't be concerned with my absence."

"Why not?" she asked weakly, not understanding how he could suddenly be so cold. He hadn't even hugged her, and Remus had never let her come this close to tears without a word of comfort or a hug. It was part of what made him so brilliant, and it was as though suddenly he couldn't bear her presence.

"Please focus on your studies, Lydia," he sighed.

"I do focus," she promised. "I didn't even mean to ignore Professor Snape."

"You never mean anything, and yet it still happens. You are going to get yourself

into more trouble than I can help you with one of these days. I expected better from you in my absence."

His words felt like a dagger, and the tears she had been holding back abruptly began streaming down her cheeks. "You won't even look at me!" she suddenly shouted. "You've been mean all week! I expected better from you, too!"

Hurt and confused and upset, she spun on her heel and ran out of the classroom, ignoring Remus's calls for her as she ran back to her dormitory. She was crying in huge, embarrassing sobs by the time

she reached the Common Room, and she threw herself down on the couch, not caring that there were other students around.

After a few minutes, she felt a hand rubbing circles on her back. She sniffled and sat up, wiping at her tears to find her friend Annie sitting next to her. Annie was her closest friend in Gryffindor, since Briallen was in Hufflepuff, but Lydia wanted her mum or her dad or Briallen. She didn't want to talk to anyone else right now. No one else would understand how much it hurt for Remus to be so cold and uncaring towards her, or the anxiety she felt over her parents and Uncle Sirius after last weekend.

"Did something happen with your godfather?" Annie asked quietly. "You stayed after class today."

"He's a big mean git!" she cried miserably.

"Maybe he's just having a bad day," Annie offered reasonably. "Maybe he's still feeling under the weather."

Lydia mumbled something in quiet agreement and shook off her friend's hand. She really just wanted to be alone, so she dragged her bag and books upstairs to her dormitory and buried herself under the blankets for a kip.

Annie woke her for dinner, and she reluctantly followed her friends down to the Great Hall. As much as she wanted to ignore him, she couldn't help glancing up to the professor's tables to find her godfather looking tense and nervous and decidedly guilty. Well, serves him right, she thought grumpily.

She felt his gaze on her all through the meal, and so she made an art of looking away every time he managed to catch her eye. She hadn't forgiven him yet, and she had no plans of doing so until he made a full and thorough apology. All right, perhaps she should be a little better about talking during class, but she wasn't doing that badly. She did well on most of her tests and essays, especially in his class. She secretly worried that she wasn't as smart as her mum and dad, but they never seemed to mind too much, and she was hardly failing. She did get in trouble more than necessary, but her parents mostly laughed it off, except for a few stern letters imploring her to apply herself (those were from her mum). The point was, Remus was entirely unfair about the whole mess, and whatever had

him in a foul mood wasn't her fault, so why should he take it out on her?

After mostly picking at her food, Lydia was ready to return to the Common Room to take a stab at finishing even half of the homework she'd been assigned for the night. She once more noticed Remus's gaze, then made a big show of talking to her friends and making to leave the Great Hall. Unfortunately, he was faster than she anticipated and popped up behind her before she could follow through on her intentions to go without speaking to him once.

"Lydia," he called just as she was heading out. He usually followed protocol and called her by her last name when there were other students present, but she could tell by the distress in his face that he was beyond the point of worrying about it.

"Go ahead," she told her friends, who all cast her worried looks and glared at the professor. She almost felt a little guilty about that; Annie and Eliza adored the Defense professor, and they shouldn't hate him on her account.

"Would you have tea in my office?" he asked her. "After this afternoon, I realised we ought to have a talk."

"All right," she reluctantly agreed. As much as she didn't want to forgive him for shouting, he was her godfather, and he was a brilliant one at that.

Lydia followed after him into his office, and as soon as he had shut the door, he knelt down and enfolded her in a hug. "I'm sorry, Lulu," he murmured. "I didn't realise how unfairly I treated you. Can you forgive me?"

To her surprise, Lydia noted that he was shuddering a little, probably with the fear that she would hate him for snapping at her. But his fear was entirely unfounded. That was just her godfather...always worried that he deserved so much worse than he really did. Didn't he realise how many times her dad had gotten lost in a fit of temper and shouted at her? Or the way her mum could scold her for hours without losing steam even once? Lydia did not come from a family unaccustomed to bouts of temper, and though her godfather was the least likely one to explode, she always knew she would forgive him.

"Of course I forgive you," she said easily. "But did something happen? You said not my mum and dad...but Uncle Sirius?" she asked worriedly.

"Oh Lydia," he sighed sadly and stepped back, running a hand through his already thinning hair. "Let's have tea and some biscuits," he suggested, waving his wand and starting the tea and offering her a plate of biscuits that was probably supplied by the house elves. Remus always knew how to get the elves to bring just about anything, and someday, he promised to teach her.

"I'm scared, Remus," she confessed. "You acted strange all week. You wouldn't even look at me!" she pouted. "And Uncle Sirius called you on Halloween, and then Mum and Dad said he was really sad, and he wouldn't come to dinner with us Saturday. Is he all right?"

"I'm afraid I've made a mess of things, Lulu," her godfather sighed again. "Something did happen this week, something that's left me rather out of sorts," he explained wearily. "But it isn't anything for you to worry yourself over. Your mum, your dad, and your Uncle Sirius are all quite all right."

"Do you promise?" she asked shakily. "You aren't only saying that so I won't be afraid?"

"I promise," he vowed. And Lydia believed him. She knew that Remus would not ever, ever lie to her, even if he did lose his temper. "I suspect your mum and dad will explain it all to you this weekend, and I wish I hadn't made this something on your mind. It's been a difficult week, and I'm afraid I've taken it out on you."

"I shouldn't have talked out of turn," she admitted. "I promise I didn't mean to, honest! Professor Snape really does hate me," she reasoned. "I suppose I was talking when he started teaching, but I didn't know he started! No one else did, either, and he just picked on me because it's...me! I swear I didn't-"

"Hush," he chuckled a bit. "I know how Professor Snape feels about you. About the same way he felt about me during our school days. As well as your father and Sirius. We never got on, and I'm afraid you are the one paying for it now. Just as you are paying for my little outburst of frustration this afternoon."

"That's all right," she offered generously, knowing she couldn't really hold a grudge against her godfather if he was truly sorry about it.

"You should work on behaving, young lady," he scolded mildly. "I know Professor Snape targets you rather unfairly, but you perhaps make yourself an easy target."

"I know," she blushed a little.

"You're a good girl, Lydia. Let your friendliness and kindness be a gift, not a burden," he chided gently. "If you closed your mouth when it ought to be closed and spoke when it was your turn to speak, you'd avoid a great deal of trouble and still have all the friends you have now."

"I know," she sighed. "That's what Dad says, too."

"He is smarter than we give him credit for," he laughed. "Now finish up your tea, Lulu. I suspect you have some homework you ought to finish for tomorrow," he said pointedly.

"How do you always know?" she sighed dramatically, taking a large gulp of her tea to finish it off, swiping another biscuit, and then skipping out of the room.

As Remus predicted, Artemis flew in Friday morning with a note from her mum, explaining that she would be returned home for the weekend. Dumbledore had apparently given special permission for her to leave for the weekend even though it wasn't a holiday, and just after class, Remus was to take her to Hogsmeade and then Apparate with her to Godric's Hollow.

The note had not been very specific, and Lydia guessed her mum spent quite some time figuring out precisely the best way to word it so as to give nothing away. It was full of very mum-like promises that everything was all right and they would see her soon.

It all made Lydia sick to her stomach, and though she kept her mouth shut at all appropriate times during her classes, she couldn't focus on a word her professors were saying. All day, she speculated over what they might have to tell her. Remus had sworn that everyone was all right, and she trusted him enough to believe he

meant it. So the question was, what could have possibly happened to leave everyone so out of sorts?

She was no closer to an answer at the end of the day than she was at the beginning. She quickly scrambled to the tower to pack up her belongings, then met Remus in the entry hall of the castle.

"Ready, Lulu?" he smiled gently.

"Won't you tell me what this is about?" she asked anxiously as she followed him through the great heavy doors at the front of Hogwarts.

"I'm afraid not. We have to wait for your mum and dad."

"Will Uncle Sirius be there?" she inquired, watching him carefully to see his reaction. Her dad always said Remus was the worst liar of all of them, and the reason they had gotten caught in many pranks back in their school days. She found herself it was true; her godfather was utter pants at keeping secrets, and his facial expressions tended to give a lot away. This time was no exception. He quite visibly winced, then made a valiant effort to recover before she saw. Well, too late for that.

"No, Lydia," he shook his head. "Sirius won't be there tonight."

"But it's about him, isn't it? At least, something that has to do with him. I know because he called you on Halloween, and then he didn't come to dinner, and that was when you started acting strangely!" she accused.

"You are too smart for your own good," he sighed. "But quit with the questions. I'll not tell you anything until you're home, all right?" he advised sternly.

"All right," she grumbled, shooting him an irritated look just for good measure.

The walk to Hogsmeade was frustratingly long and chilly. Remus set a warming charm on her clothes, but she still complained, just because she could. Remus might not crack and tell her, but he would at least suffer for it, she decided.

When they finally arrived at her house in Godric's Hollow, everything was disturbingly silent. "Anyone here?" Remus called as he let himself in through the wards as he had been doing for years. Although her parents were rather paranoid about that sort of thing, Sirius and Remus had always been able to enter their house.

"In the sitting room," her mum called back.

Lydia quite nearly dropped her bag in shock when she stepped into the sitting room and found her mum and dad seated at the sofa. There was a huge tray on the table in front of them, full of biscuits and sweets and cups of tea. It was so oddly formal, utterly unlike her parents. Both her mum and her dad were sitting so stiffly, their smiles so forced and the tension so palpable Lydia thought she might choke.

A terrible feeling started to churn in her stomach. She always thought her parents were the most loving people in the whole world. They always seemed delighted with each other, and they fought rather splendidly with great shouts and occasional hexes, but it almost always ended in laughter instead of tears or slamming doors. But Eliza's parents were divorced, and she had told all of her friends about the day her mum and dad broke the news. It couldn't be...could it? Not her mum and dad!

"We never have tea in here," she shook her head. It wasn't quite what she wanted to say, but from the worried looks the adults all shared, she gathered that they understood.

"We have something to tell you, Lulu," her dad announced. "We thought perhaps...well, perhaps this is a bit much," he admitted.

"Is it something really terrible?" she asked nervously. "Because Eliza's parents made a big dinner when they were getting divorced, and-"

"What?" her mum cut her off. "Lydia, no, darling, of course not!"

"Everyone is being so weird! Remus and the two of you, and Uncle Sirius isn't even writing me back!"

"Sit down, Lydia," her mum urged. "You as well, Remus."

Lydia didn't like it, but she did as she was told and sat across from her parents in an overstuffed chair, while Remus claimed another closer to the fireplace. "Lydia," her dad began carefully after a long moment. "We have something to tell you."

"Everyone keeps saying that," she grumbled, "and yet no one is saying anything!"

Remus chuckled a bit at that, but her parents both shot him dark looks. For her dad to remain so sober, she knew it must be serious.

"We're sorry, dear," her mum responded with a sigh. "I hope very much that this will be good news, but it isn't easy to explain. We've wanted to work out the best way to tell you. It's likely to come as a bit of a shock, to say the least."

"What are you talking about?" she frowned. "You aren't making sense."

Her mum and dad shared another look, then nodded briefly as though they'd actually said something to one another. Her dad turned to look her straight in the eye, his face somber and his hands shaking a bit. "Lydia, we've found your brother," he told her plainly. "It was your Uncle Sirius who found him. On Halloween."

Her mouth went dry and her head suddenly felt a little funny. "W-what?" she whispered. "No. No, Harry died. He died before I was born."

"We thought he did," her dad nodded. "But...we made an awful mistake, Lydia. We saw the nursery on fire and knew he was too little to have survived. We...we were so upset, and so frightened, and the fire..."

"Your brother wasn't in the room anymore, Lydia," her mum jumped in to save him. "We don't understand how, but somehow Harry managed to Apparate out of the room. We believed he died, but he was found and taken to a children's home...a sort of orphanage."

She blinked a few times, wondering if perhaps this was a very elaborate joke. But her parents would never make jokes about Harry. She knew that for certain. Harry was one thing her father would never, ever joke about, and her mum looked so pained at the

mention of the children's home, she knew it must be true. "He's alive?" she asked weakly, barely able to wrap her head around the idea.

"Yes, Love," her mum nodded. "It's a miracle, really. Sirius found him on Halloween and brought him to his house to help him get well."

"Get well?" she inquired.

"He hasn't had an easy life, Lulu," Remus explained gently.

"What does that mean?"

Her parents shared another worried look. "Well, Lulu," her dad began again. "It means that Harry lived with a few families after the children's home, and they weren't very nice to him. He hasn't been treated very well, so he ran away."

"Then who did he live with?" she frowned.

"No one, Sweetheart," her mum answered heavily, sounding as though the weight of the world was pressing down on her chest for all the sadness in her voice. "Harry's been on his own. It was quite cold the night Sirius found him. He was very ill, and we're so lucky he was found when he was."

"Is he all right now?" she asked hopefully.

"He will be," her mum promised. "It will take him some time."

She heaved a sigh of relief at that, then suddenly it hit her what they were saying. Her brother...her big brother! The brother she had dreamed of all her life was no longer just a dream. He was a real, living, breathing person! He was alive after all, and she could finally meet him and talk to him and share all the things she had always wanted to share with him.

"So where is he?" she asked anxiously. "Is he here? Did you bring him home? Oh, we ought to do up his room! We could make it all his favourite colours, and...oh, is he coming to Hogwarts soon? He's probably behind, but he could start out with me! He'll be a Gryffindor,

won't he? And then he could come to classes with me, and I'll help him with-

"Lydia," her dad cut her off.

"Oh Love," her mum sighed.

Lydia's excitement faded as she realised that no one else seemed as excited as she did. "What?" she asked in confusion. "Why does everyone look so sad? Harry's alive!"

"Yes, Sweetheart, he is," her mum confirmed. "But you need to remember what we said about Harry having a hard life. He's only just learned that he has a family and that magic is real."

"He didn't know about magic?" she asked incredulously. It seemed absurd, really, that her brother – her famous, hero brother – could possibly think he was a Muggle! Everyone in their world knew about Harry, the Boy Who Defeated Voldemort, and he didn't even know it!

"Or us, Lu," her dad added. "Sirius explained everything, but it's been a shock to him, and your brother will need some time to adjust."

"Oh," she frowned. "Well, all right. But is he here now? Can I stay home with him for a while? I promise I'll make up all my work."

"Lydia," Remus sighed, and she turned to face her godfather, who looked so distressed and so tired.

"Sweetheart," her mum whispered, tears filling her eyes. "Harry isn't here. You can't meet him right now."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't want to see us," her dad answered, and she noticed a harsh edge to his voice that hadn't been there before.

"I don't understand. What do you mean? Why wouldn't he want to see us?"

"He thinks...he thinks we abandoned him, Lydia."

"He's confused," her mum added, giving her dad a pointed glare. "He thinks we should have looked for him."

"But we didn't know!" she protested. "If we knew, we would have! Doesn't he know that?"

"No, Love, he doesn't," her mum shook her head. "Harry has been all on his own since he was very little. He didn't get to grow up like you. He doesn't understand how much we love him, and he's frightened right now. I'm certain he'll come around, but for now, we need to give him what he needs. If he asks us for time and space, that's what we'll give him."

"No, you're wrong," she argued. "He's family! He should be here with us!"

"He's with your Uncle Sirius. He's with family, and he's being taken care of," her dad assured her.

"But he should be here!" she cried, frustrated that they would argue with her on this. Harry might not know how brilliant her parents were, but how would he learn if he didn't come and stay with them? And how was she going to get to know her big brother if he didn't come and talk to her.

"He will be, Lulu," Remus tried to calm her. "Sirius will help him. He just needs time now."

"Can I go there there, then?" she asked hopefully. "I just want to see him. I swear I won't bother him."

"You know we want you to be there with him," her mum answered gently. "But Harry isn't ready for that yet."

"I'll be nice," she promised. "I won't say anything I shouldn't. I promise! I really promise that I won't. Please, can't I go?"

"This is not about you, Love," her mum shook her head. "I know that when the time comes, you will be kind and gracious and generous, just as you always are. But we must respect Harry's wishes. Do you understand?"

"No," she whispered, tears filling her eyes and blurring her vision. Her brother...her own big brother...the big brother she dreamed of all her life. Her brother the hero, her brother who ought to be her best friend, her protector, her blood...he didn't even want to see her. "How could he not want to see us?"

"Lydia, please, Sweetheart," her mum implored. "Just give him time. I promise everything will be all right."

Lydia looked to her dad, hoping he would agree and promise that this would all work out. As much as she loved her mum, she wanted her daddy to be the one to swear. He was the one she turned to, and he had to be the one to promise Harry would come home to them.

But her dad merely clenched his jaw and looked away from her. He wouldn't meet her eyes, and his hands were still trembling. She wanted him to come to her and wrap his arms around her as he usually did when she was upset, but he was so far away from her, so distant and withdrawn. He had offered her no words of hope, leaving that task entirely to her mum and godfather.

Without another word, Lydia scrambled off the chair and bolted upstairs to her own room, slamming the door shut and throwing herself onto the bed to sob.

Lydia eventually cried herself to sleep and did not wake until long after the sun was down and supper had passed. Her stomach was too upset for her to feel hungry, and her head ached from the tears as she sat up and clutched her blankets around her. The bedroom was completely dark, so she knew her mum hadn't been here. If she had, there would be a small flame burning on the bedside table. It was a favourite bit of magic her mum did, and she had always done it when Lydia was upset or frightened.

Sniffling again, she climbed out of bed and quietly stepped out of her room. She desperately wanted cocoa with her mum, maybe a few words with her dad. She wanted to be hugged and comforted, childish though it may be.

Just as she reached the top of the stairs, she heard tense voices from the kitchen. She grew silent and still, hiding in the shadows so no one would see her as she listened.

"What are you going to tell Lydia?" her mum demanded. "Do you really think she won't notice that you're gone?"

"I can't worry about that right now," her dad answered dismissively.

"Your daughter?" her mum accused. "You can't be bothered to think about your own daughter?"

"Yes, Lily, I'm a miserable father," he spat bitterly. "I think we've proved that point."

"I've never thought that. No one has. But if you keep doing this, she will find out, and then what are we going to tell her? It's hard enough, James. You know that. You saw how she took this."

"It's best for everyone if I stay away," he said firmly. "It's my fault this happened."

"I was there, too. Have you forgotten that?"

"And you were trying to get to him. I held you back."

"So I wouldn't die as well!" her mum exclaimed. "And I would have, James. You knew that, you stopped me."

"You would have figured something out. You would have known it was wrong."

"Please, just stop this," her mum pleaded, and Lydia could hear the tears and the strain in her voice. She bit her own lip, trying not to cry for her parents as she realised just how bad things were for them.

"I can't," her dad said quietly. "I'm sorry. You have no idea...I'm so sorry, Lily."

"If you were sorry, you would stay. Or take us with you. Lydia and I could come to the manor, too. We'd all be together. Please. I need you, James. I need your help. I'm sad, too, and I want him here with me so badly. I don't know what to say to Lydia, or how to help her, and I can't be on my own another night. Please," she repeated. "Just let us come with you."

"No, Lily. I've told you, no."

Unable to bear it anymore, Lydia jumped up and stormed down the stairs. "You're leaving?" she asked her dad accusingly. "You're just leaving us here?"

"Lydia," he breathed painfully. "I'm not...I'm not going anywhere. I've just been sleeping at Potter Manor. Just for a few days. It's-"

"Don't talk to me!" she demanded as fresh tears began to stream down her cheeks. "I hate you!"

"Lydia!" her mum cried.

"I hate you!" she yelled again.

"Lulu, please," her dad murmured and stepped towards her. But she no longer wanted his hugs or his comfort, his empty words or his excuses. They needed him, and he was going to leave.

"No wonder Harry doesn't want to know you. I don't want to, either!"

Tears running furiously down her cheeks, she spun on her heels and ran away.

A/N: Sorry I'm late this week! Busy week! The next one will be up within a week! Thanks for all the support!

Chapter Thirteen

James Potter inherited his expansive manor house on the outskirts of Godric's Hollow at the young age of eighteen. His father passed away during his final year of school, and his mum, bless her, hadn't outlived him for long. He always suspected the announcement that he was marrying Lily had given his mother incentive to survive a bit longer. She was lively and animated all through their wedding preparations, always there to help Lily with the stress of it and to explain all the old wizarding customs, and no one had beamed as brightly as she did as she watched her only child marry the love of his life. On a quiet, sunny day just a month after the wedding, his mother died quietly in her sleep.

Originally, they discussed moving into Potter Manor. James never truly believed it was right for them, but he hadn't wanted to deny Lily the opportunity to live in his ancestral home if it was what she desired. It was lovely and enormous, full of relics that survived thousands of years. A pair of house-elves kept it in order, and if Lily had chosen to live there, she would never have needed to cook a meal or raise a wand to clean the house. James grew up there with all the rooms, all the expensive things, the huge gardens and the lovely trees. He remembered a happy childhood, full of explorations through the long corridors and broom rides through the gardens, but he never imagined it for his future. When he married Lily, he pictured a place of their own, a charming little home with rooms for their children but without all the memories of the past.

They started out in a little flat in London, convenient for Order meetings and not too much work for the newly-married couple. When the Prophecy was made about Harry and Dumbledore advised them to go into hiding, they moved back to Godric's Hollow and bought the house that would eventually burn to the ground. It had been perfect for their new family, and even in the midst of hiding, James had loved that house and all it represented. He'd been such a fool then, so confident he and his friends would keep his family safe. He had trusted too easily, fallen too quickly into the traps set for him. He was supposed to be a brilliant wizard, and yet he had been deceived by someone who called himself a friend.

Now James found himself back at Potter Manor. His childhood house-elves still kept it in top order, and they were beside themselves with pleasure to have a master to look after again. The house was still and silent, full of echoes of memories and the pain of loss. He remembered being a child here, full of careless whimsy and mischief. He remembered being a teenager, wreaking havoc with Sirius as they planned pranks and experimented with magic. He remembered lying in his bed and thinking of Lily, imagining the day she would say yes. It had all been so simple then, so clear. He was invincible, even when war began. They would fight, and they would win. His friends would be by his side, and he would marry Lily and start a family. They would be impossibly, deliriously happy.

But it all went wrong, and he was here alone. He could have his wife here with him, he could have his precious daughter, but he didn't deserve them. He started this whole chain of events by refusing Dumbledore's offer to be Secret Keeper. He allowed Voldemort to find them. It was his job to keep Lily and Harry safe, and he failed them in that one ultimate task. Maybe everyone believed Harry was dead, maybe Dumbledore had been convinced of it, but he was Harry's dad. Lily tried to reach their baby, to find him through the flames, but he had been the one to hold her back. She instinctively knew something was wrong, and he stopped her, he held her back.

Where would they be now if he had let her go? In that moment, he had been so terrified of losing her, too, so paralysed at the thought of losing his wife and his child all at once. He knew he wouldn't survive without her, and so he held her back, kept her from going to Harry. She would have found his room empty, would have found that he was missing. They would have searched the world to find him, and he would have come home safe and sound, tucked into his own bed with his mum and dad beside him. His son, his beloved son, never would have suffered more than a few hours of fear as a mere infant if James had been bolder, stronger, better.

Now his son hated him, and who could blame him? Harry grew up alone and forgotten, abandoned and neglected. He hid in shelters, slept on park benches, braved winter snows and cold rains and hot summer days by himself, all by the tender age of thirteen. How many times had his Harry curled himself into a ball to stop from feeling the hunger? How many times had he cried himself to sleep and wondered where he came from, why he was left alone? How many families did he watch walk by and wish to be a part of?

Harry could have died. That was the part that haunted him most. That was the part that sent him bolting upright in a cold sweat each night. His son could have died from injuries inflicted by foster families, from cold, from starvation. He could have died alone in an abandoned building, and no one would have been there to mourn him. He would have been found someday, given an unmarked grave and never thought of again. Harry's death would have meant nothing to anyone, and he would have carried on without blinking, without feeling the loss of a child he buried long ago. The thought of a child – his child – so forgotten and abused made his chest ache and his stomach churn with cruel, vicious guilt. He would never forgive himself. Not ever. So how could his son ever forgive him for that? How could his wife forgive him for losing their son? How could his daughter forgive him for depriving her of a brother?

Lydia. The thought of her and that look on her face...it hurt nearly as much as the look on Harry's face. He disappointed them both so thoroughly, and he never dreamed it possible that he would turn out to be so awful at this. He once fancied himself a fine father to Harry, the fun sort who would take him for broom rides before he was strictly allowed by his mum, the sort who kept him laughing and entertained. With Lydia, he was the hero, the brave Auror, the man who kept her giggling and protected her from everything bad in the world. They were as close as a father and daughter could be, but it was all a lie. His whole life felt a charade, a make-believe where he was only pretending to be a good father. But now Lydia had seen him for who he truly was: a coward, and a miserable failure of a father.

He knew she felt abandoned. He knew he had mucked everything up by leaving. But couldn't she see that he shouldn't be there right now? He hadn't even intended for this to go on as long as it had, but once he was out of their house, he realised he couldn't go back. Not yet, anyway. He finally understood why Sirius locked himself up in Grimmauld Place after that Halloween; something about the loneliness felt like an appropriate punishment, and being home...that was a luxury he could no longer allow himself. Not if he had any hope of ever convincing Harry that he loved him.

The problem was, James wasn't even sure he wanted to try. He loved his son; he always had and always would. Nothing could ever change the depth of that love, except perhaps to stretch it, to grow it,

as he saw the remarkable child his son had become all on his own. His strength, his resilience, his capacity to endure what most adults could not...Harry James Potter was a fine young man, and James couldn't be more amazed. But Harry spent twelve years on his own. He was four years from his coming of age, so what could he possibly need from a father? Especially one who failed as spectacularly as James had failed? He was hardly fit to be anyone's dad, especially Harry's. Harry needed someone who understood, someone who could talk to him about abuse and neglect, someone who could help when there were nightmares and broken hearts.

James was not that person. Harry's supposed death was the only great tragedy in an otherwise easy life. He grew up spoiled and rich, he excelled in everything at school and was surrounded by friends and admirers, and though his great love took a while to come around, she eventually loved him back and loved him fiercely. He had seen suffering and death in the war, and those long months in hiding fearing for Lily and Harry had been straight from his worst nightmares, but how could he relate to an abused runaway child? He essentially abandoned his son; how could he ever hope to make that right?

Sirius was the right choice. Sirius saved his life and cultivated the trust James had lost. Sirius was abused by his own parents, forced to run away to save his own life...just like Harry. Though Sirius generally seemed like the least responsible of the Marauders, James knew the real man behind the childish pranks. Beneath his easy sense of humour, there was a deeply wounded man who had stitched himself back together and was stronger for it. Sirius had the true heart of a Gryffindor, brave and loyal and true, and James had no doubt he would be there every time Harry needed him. He had loved Harry like his own from the moment he was born, so why not raise him now? Why not allow Harry to stay in the home he had already chosen?

It might tear Lily apart. It might break Lydia's heart to be separated from her brother. But he had spent all these years seeing to their needs, and it was Harry's turn to come first.

Noble intentions didn't stop him from aching, though, from missing his son so desperately that he wanted to scream in frustration. It seemed impossible now that he had endured twelve years without Harry when every second now felt interminable without him. He

wanted to go to London now and gather his boy in his arms. He wanted to hold him tight and swear to him he was loved, cherished, adored all the days of his life. The tears came again as he thought of his little boy, those green eyes from Lily, that hair from him.

Instead of allowing himself to break down and sob, James imagined a different sort of torture and dragged himself up the stairs to his old bedroom. Unbeknownst to Lily, James had a tradition that he kept between himself and his son all these years. When he had graduated from Hogwarts, his mum took him quietly aside and handed him a box of letters – one for every year of his life, written by his father. It felt like his father was speaking to him beyond the grave, and it meant more than he could ever say. The day Harry was born, he knew he had to do the same for his own son. But he had continued long after Harry's supposed death, and just this July, he had added the fourteenth letter to the box he kept hidden here up on a shelf.

Unfolding the first one, he sat down on his bed and began to read.

Lily spent a nearly silent weekend at home with her daughter. Her usually vivacious, talkative, forgiving little girl had shut herself in her room and refused to come out, opening the door only so that Lily could hand her a plate to eat. Lily had desperately hoped Lydia's teenage hormones would not emerge in full for a few years yet, but it seemed she was starting early as she pouted and sulked and refused Lily's every attempt to cajole her into a walk or a cup of cocoa or a show on the Wireless.

By Sunday, Lily was very seriously considering shouting at her youngest child. Didn't she know Lily was doing her best? How could it be her fault that James was gone? Or that Harry refused to see them? Had she any idea how all of this was torturing her mum?

No, of course not, a little voice in the back of her head reminded her. Lydia might be a sweet and perceptive child, but she was still a child, and she couldn't possibly fathom how it felt for a parent to see her children in pain and be so helpless to stop it. Harry couldn't, either, and that thought alone kept her from wanting to throttle them both.

On Sunday morning, a sheepish Lydia finally emerged from her room and quietly requested to bake biscuits. Normally Lily would have railed at her and demanded an explanation for her abysmal

behaviour this weekend, but instead, she nodded silently and pressed a kiss to the top of her daughter's head.

"I want to send these to Harry," Lydia announced when they pulled the first tray out of the oven.

"Oh Lydia," she sighed. "I'm not sure-"

"Is he mad at me?"

"No, Love, of course not," she shook her head quickly. "He isn't truly mad at anyone, I don't think. Harry is just so terribly confused, and we have to remember that he's had no one there for him all this time."

"No one?" Lydia asked mournfully, her eyes dripping with sympathy.

Lily wrapped her daughter up in a tight hug and tried to find it in her to be grateful that one of her children had grown up safe, secure, and fully aware of how much she was loved. "He needs more time, Lulu," she whispered. "You'll see. Everything is going to be all right."

"What about Daddy?"

Lily had to try very hard to fight back the tears. The moment Lydia was gone back to Hogwarts, she feared she might drown herself in them. "Someday, Lydia, you're going to understand how much it hurts us when one of you is hurting. Your dad is having a hard time letting it go this time, and I think he's convinced himself he ought to stay for our own good."

"That's rubbish," Lydia pouted.

Trust an eleven-year old to put it so succinctly. "Yes," she chuckled. "It is. But I want you try your best not to worry yourself. Your dad can be foolish at times, but he always comes around."

"Do you think he will soon?"

"I certainly hope so, but we may have to talk some sense into him."

"Or hex it into him," Lydia grinned tentatively.

Lily rolled her eyes and gave her daughter a little shove towards the second batch of biscuits that needed to be baked. "You really are your father's daughter," she sighed.

Just as they finished up the last of the biscuits and sent Artemis off with a batch for Harry, Remus popped in through the Floo as previously agreed to return Lydia to school. Lily suddenly felt an overwhelming panic, worse than she had felt when she sent her daughter off on the Hogwarts Express.

"Will you be all right at school? I can keep you home, if you'd rather," she asked worriedly.

"I'll get behind," Lydia shook her head. "I want to go back."

Lily forced herself to nod and give nothing away. "All right. Don't worry, Sweetheart. Everything will be just fine."

"I'll be there," Remus reminded them both. "Anything you need, you come to me," he told Lydia.

"I will," she promised. "I love you, Mum."

Lily kissed her daughter one last time, then reluctantly allowed Remus to whisk her back to Hogsmeade.

With no one to distract her from her own misery, Lily felt herself drawn to the attic against all better judgment. She knew it was a bad idea, knew it would only bring grief and tears, but she found herself drawn there anyway.

The boxes were stacked along the wall, unlabelled but set apart from all the others. Most of Harry's toys and clothing had been destroyed in the fire, but the items that were rescued had been tenderly packed away and kept safe in the attic. It was rare that Lily allowed herself to walk down that path, and she felt the tears stinging her eyes as she pulled out her wand and murmured the spell to undo the sealing on the box.

Kneeling down among the boxes, Lily reached for the first item and pulled out a soft blue baby blanket. They had left it on the sofa the night they were attacked, and Sirius had retrieved it before the fire spread to the sitting room, along with a few other precious items. Lily

brought it to her face, wishing it still smelled of baby powder as it used to. She remembered wrapping up her beautiful boy in this blanket and holding him close, loving the fresh, sweet scent of him. It seemed impossible he had ever been so tiny, and more impossible that her sweet infant became the frightened boy now living with Sirius. "Oh Harry," she whispered. "You were always meant to be safe in my arms."

Tears obscured her vision as she lovingly folded the blanket and placed it beside her. The next item was a photo album put together with photographs she had given to Remus and Sirius. They lost all their pictures, but Remus and Sirius had made copies of theirs, and while she was pregnant with Lydia, she put together an album of all the remaining pictures. The first was James holding his newborn son, his eyes closing as he brought Harry close and kissed his tiny forehead. The next was their little family together for the first time, Harry in between them. Every few seconds, Sirius would appear from out of the scene and pop into the picture, scooping his little godson up as Lily and James both reached for him.

By the end of the album, Lily was sobbing and had to get out of the attic. The grief was crushing her, reminding her how full of hope they had once been for their child. He was a little prince, the heir to an ancient Wizarding line and a new life in the midst of war. Everyone had been so certain Harry would be a great wizard, with his mum's intelligence and his dad's raw talent, his mum's dedication and his dad's creativity. No matter how many children were born after him, he would be the first at Hogwarts, the first to inherit the Marauder's Map, the first to wear the Invisibility Cloak. Instead, her precious little boy had been hurt – Merlin only knew how badly – by foster families who drove him to the streets. Her sweet little infant grew into a boy who lived on the streets rather than face the cruelty of those who ought to protect him. A part of her was desperate to know every time he had suffered, every moment his stomach had ached with hunger, every time he had convulsed with cold. Another hoped she would never know, knew she could never bear it.

Harry. My Harry, she thought miserably as she fled the attic. She headed straight for the guest bedroom, the room that had never been used. There was a small bed and dresser, as though they might someday host a guest here, but anyone close to them knew this was a tribute to a dead boy, a room forever empty because he was no longer with them.

Lily could no longer bear the emptiness. And she had to hope. She had to hope he would come home to her because she would go mad if he did not. Pulling out her wand once more, she switched the walls from a dull ecru to a soft sage green. She enchanted the ceiling with puffy clouds that moved across the room, so that looking up at the ceiling, he could imagine he was flying. Someday, she decided as she tirelessly continued the work transforming the room into a soothing paradise for her boy. Someday you will see this and know how much I love you.

Harry had another nightmare over the weekend and woke up crying and sick. He spent the better part of Sunday hiding in his room, embarrassed that this kept happening and not up for pretending everything was all right. He felt completely out of sorts, disgusted with himself for not being able to control his fears and emotions and strangely guilty for the way he had dismissed his parents despite feeling quite sure they had abandoned him. It left him all tied up in knots and made his stomach ache all over again.

"You need to eat more," his godfather scolded at dinner on Sunday night. Harry was seated at the table listlessly pushing carrots around on the plate, wishing he had the appetite to eat the delicious meal Kreacher had prepared. Everything looked and smelled amazing, and there was so much of it, more food than Harry had seen in his life, but his stomach turned against him after only a few bites, and he really didn't want to sick up at Sirius's table.

"I'm not very hungry," he mumbled and reluctantly swallowed a bite of potato.

"You need to gain weight, Harry," Sirius scolded mildly. "That means you need to eat up. This business of waking up ill certainly isn't helping you."

"I'm-"

"It isn't your fault," his godfather cut off his apology. "But I want to see you

getting well. The sooner we see to that, the sooner you'll be out flying your broom and exhausting me, no doubt."

"You'll show me how to fly?" he asked hopefully.

"Of course, but not until you're feeling a bit better."

Harry was almost positive he felt well enough for flying, but Sirius was obviously of a different opinion. Yet another thing dangled before him but just out of his reach, but at least Sirius would probably carry through and teach him eventually, even if it did take a while before he stopped being so worried. Despite the churning in his stomach, he stabbed at his meat and forced himself to chew and swallow.

"Ah, think I've found the right incentive," Sirius grinned. "You'll be flying in no time."

Harry smiled sheepishly and choked down most of his meal, then groaned when Sirius pulled out biscuits.

"You don't have to eat one yet," he promised, "but you ought to know...Lily and Lydia sent these earlier today."

"They...they sent me something?" he asked in confusion. "She knows? About me?"

"James and Lily brought her home this weekend to explain to her," Sirius explained gently.

"Was she...do you know if she's...upset?" he asked, stumbling a little over the words as he tried to place his feelings on the matter. He didn't really know why it mattered to him, but suddenly, it did. His sister, after all, was probably innocent in all this mess. She wasn't even alive when it happened, so he could hardly blame her, could he? And the thought of having someone out there...someone who was related to him, by blood, that might even actually care about him...

"Their note didn't say much, but I very much doubt she was upset, mate," Sirius said calmly. "I don't think Lydia has yet met a person she didn't like, and she's been dreaming about her big brother since she could say your name."

So then she'll just be disappointed, Harry decided. Perhaps it was just better to pretend she didn't exist after all.

"How about a walk?" Sirius suggested, suddenly changing the subject completely. It was hardly a subtle move, but Harry appreciated it all the same. He didn't want to think anymore. Not about James, who had looked at him with that stricken expression, or Lily, whose screams haunted his sleep, or Lydia, the sister he would never know. He liked it here with Sirius, and this was enough – more than, really. He could be content with this forever.

Harry was tired again after their stroll through the park, so Sirius sent him to rest in his room while he called Remus on the Floo and hoped to get through to him. He knew the werewolf would be helping out with Lydia this weekend, but that also meant he probably insisted on taking her back to school to see to homework. Remus loved order and discipline, and he would undoubtedly push Lydia to use her studies to distract her from the chaos of her life at the moment.

He had lied to Harry. Only a white lie, really, but he still felt awful about it. Harry was so sincere it was heartbreaking, and it made Sirius feel like Voldemort himself for daring to hide something from the boy. But he did know how Lydia had handled the news. Remus sent his own note venting his frustrations and his anger and his helplessness to aid Lydia in her sufferings. Because she was upset, but not because Harry existed, not because Harry was alive, but because he refused to see her. Lydia had so much love, Sirius sometimes wondered how her heart didn't just burst from all of it. Lily was much the same way, but Lily could harbour a grudge and did not easily forgive those who had wronged her. Lydia, on the other hand, seemed like a fount of gushing adoration for just about everyone. Sirius had secretly thought she might go to Hufflepuff, but apparently her completely unabashed and bold attempts to make friends with even the worst sort sent her to Gryffindor after all. It was a sort of bravery to offer friendship even to those most unlikely to accept it.

That Lydia's own brother rejected her had to crush that lovely little spirit. There was no one Lydia would adore more, except perhaps James. Sirius could still picture that cute little creature in pigtails who told him wild stories about Harry when he was little more than an imaginary friend to her. He had been a frequent character in her made-up tales, a fact that both pained and delighted her parents. It

was always certain that Lydia would have loved her brother, and it hurt that she could never know him.

Except now she could. Now her dreams could come true and she could meet her brother, talk to him, spend hours having great adventures with him. Even if he wasn't what she imagined, she would love him all the more for it. Harry didn't understand, of course, just as he didn't understand the everlasting love his parents had for him, or just how much he was treasured, or how desperately they all longed to wipe away every memory of every pain ever inflicted on him.

Realising that his starved godson was physically unable to eat enough to gain weight made him wonder if Harry could ever be convinced of any of it. How could anyone heal a child of twelve years of abuse? How could anyone take a child who had been denied the most basic necessities of life and teach him that he deserved so much more? Harry had never taken a bite to eat for granted, clinging to each morsel in the hopes that it would last him long enough to survive the next cold night. Sirius had been hurt, ridiculed, and betrayed by his family, but he'd never gone hungry, or thirsty, or found himself without a warm bed to sleep in. And he was still damaged. How much worse would it be for Harry?

Sighing wearily, he fought the urge to toss back a bottle of firewhiskey and instead threw a handful of powder into the fireplace as he called for Remus. The werewolf's face was pale and exhausted as they greeted each other tiredly, and they took turns sharing their woes and concerns for the Potter family.

"James has left, did you know?" Remus asked him.

"He's what?"

"He's gone. Sleeping at the manor, apparently. And Lydia knows."

"Oh Merlin. What is he thinking?"

"He's not right in the head, Sirius. It's all muddling things up for him. I know he isn't trying to hurt them, but..."

"Lily sent biscuits for Harry, but she didn't say anything."

"I reckon she's convinced herself it's nothing to worry about," Remus speculated. "Perhaps it isn't. I doubt James can stay away long."

"If he's convinced himself it's for their own good, he might," Sirius countered, adding one more member of the family he needed to be concerned about. And James had to be on his own for now. Harry had to be his sole priority, and that meant leaving James to his own devices. It was a dangerous prospect, and despite all reason, Sirius hated himself for being the one to take care of Harry when it ought to be his parents.

They were both quiet for a few minutes, then Remus switched tracks. "About Harry," he began. "I've been thinking-

"Of course you have."

Remus ignored this. "I think perhaps he ought to see a therapist."

"A what?"

"It's a Muggle thing."

"You want to fix Harry with a Muggle thing? That is your solution?" he asked incredulously. He was the last person who would malign Muggles, but even he had to admit their healing abilities left him feeling a little cold.

"Harry needs someone to talk to. Someone who isn't you," Remus added before Sirius could interject. "And until we're ready to share the news that he's alive, he can hardly see any witches or wizards. Everyone will know who he is straight away."

Sirius wanted to argue, but he had to admit, he was out of his element. Harry obviously needed help, and if Remus thought speaking with someone might ease the nightmares, or at least some of the emotional anguish that went with them, Sirius was willing to try just about anything. Remus proceeded to explain at length how Sirius could go about finding one of these muggles, but in the end, he offered to just do it for him. They disconnected the call, and Sirius went to check on Harry. He found his godson reading a book Sirius had given him from the library, and they spent a few minutes discussing one of the magical theories. Sirius left the room feeling rather proud of his godson and certain that if they spent a little time

– and perhaps asked Moony for help – Harry could be caught up and ready to attend Hogwarts next fall.

As he considered a cup of tea, the Floo roared to life and a familiar voice called for him. "Lily?" he asked in surprise as he crouched in front of the fireplace.

"Is...is Harry there?" she asked uncertainly.

"No, upstairs. But Lil..."

"Can I come through?"

Sirius wasn't sure it was the best idea, but Lily looked quite distressed and he abruptly remembered what Remus had told him about James. "Of course," he agreed, stepping back to allow her through.

She appeared before him a moment later, shaking the soot from her clothes. "I'm sorry to barge in," she apologised, her eyes suspiciously moist. "I know Harry can't find me here, but I...I don't know what else to do, Sirius!" she confessed.

"Remus told me about James," he informed her as he stepped forward to hug her. He fantasised briefly about throttling James for his idiocy, but he knew his best mate was horribly confused.

"He owled just now. He's picking up his Auror robes from the house. I couldn't be there," she shook her head.

"You know this is temporary, Lily," he tried to assure her. "James has been in

love with you since Fourth Year."

"What if it's too much?" she whispered. "I'm so worried, Padfoot."

"He's only being a fool," he countered. "Don't worry about him. He won't do anything crazy. Remus and I will make certain of it."

"No," she shook her head. "No, you have to see to Harry. I don't want you to

worry about James...or me, for that matter."

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I'm worried about the both of you."

"Harry is more important," she said resolutely.

"Yes, but when he comes around, he's going to need you both," he countered pointedly.

"I'm so angry, Sirius," she sighed. "And perhaps that's unfair of me. I know this is all...insane. Poor James is taking it all on himself, but I need him with me. Yesterday I went up to the attic, and-"

"Lily," he cut her off sternly, knowing no good could come of her perusing Harry's baby things.

"My son hates me and my husband won't come home. Don't tell me what to do, Sirius. Just...don't."

"All right," he nodded, drawing her back into another hug. "Harry doesn't hate you, though, Lily. He's frightened and confused. I know he'll come around. Just give him some more time."

"I...I hope so," she murmured.

Sirius stepped back again and gave her a grim smile. "Now, let's discuss what hex I ought to use on Prongs. Something creative, I think."

"Sirius," she laughed softly.

"The idiot needs it. Not even you can deny that," he raised an eyebrow.

"I'd like to rip his limbs off with my bare hands for leaving while Lydia was at the house," she confessed shamelessly. "No magic necessary."

"Oy, a woman scorned," he grinned devilishly.

"Worse. A mum."

"Point taken."

"But I'd forgive it all if he'd just come home," she sighed. "What am I going to do if he doesn't? How will I...Christmas will be here soon, and Lydia will be coming home. How will we explain if James doesn't return? She'll have to split her hols between the house and the manor. It isn't right, Sirius."

"It isn't," he agreed darkly. "I'm with you, Lily. Completely."

"I know you're his best mate," she murmured.

"Yes, but he's never had a problem telling me when I was being a prat. I'll have no trouble telling him the same. He's an idiot if he thinks this will solve anything. He ought to be home with you figuring all of this out."

"What is he thinking, Sirius? Sometimes I think you understand that better than I do. I don't know what could be going through his mind," she lamented.

"James isn't used to failing you. Or Lydia. Or even Harry, for that matter. It's always been important to him to give the three of you the best life he possibly could." He glanced at her carefully, not sure how much he should say. James was his brother, and they had talked about everything that mattered to them both. He knew the pressure James felt to be the man Lily wanted, the man Lily needed. He had spent so long trying to win her affections, and Lily had never truly understood how deeply that affected him. He had always played it off so well at Hogwarts, always seemed so cocky, even when she rejected him. She didn't know how much the failure stung, how miserable he was that he couldn't earn her love. When he finally did, he had been so terrified of ruining that. And it was a wound that never truly healed.

"I've told him I don't blame him. How could I? How could he be anymore at fault than I am?"

"Because he is your husband, and he is Harry's father. Don't underestimate that, Lily. He may be a modern bloke, but he's still a Potter. The tradition, the history...you can't think that didn't matter to him. He's the head of your family. He's meant to protect all of you."

Lily stiffened a bit and crossed her arms over her chest in a classic Lily defensive posture. "I can take care of myself. I think James has been made well aware of that."

"Undoubtedly, Lil," he grinned crookedly. "He'll come around."

"It seems everyone is asking for me to give them time," she muttered. "Who is going to give me time? Because I'd like to start with the twelve years I missed with my little boy."

Sirius stepped forward and wrapped her in another hug. "We all want that," he assured her quietly.

"Is he...is he wonderful?"

"Completely," he confirmed with a soft smile. "Best kid I've ever met."

"You mean he's tied with Lydia," she corrected him wryly.

"I'm Harry's godfather. I'm allowed to pick him. You, as a parent, are the one obligated to be neutral. It's perfectly within my rights to play favourites."

Lily laughed heartily and looked at least a little cheered. "Will you try to talk a bit of sense into James? If you can?"

"I'll beat it into him, if I have to," he agreed with grimace.

Lily nodded, then looked up again at Sirius. The expression in her eyes was nearly enough to break his heart. It was easy to forget that Harry was not the only one pained by this, and though he would protect his godson and keep him here as long as he wanted, he hoped for Lily's sake the boy would come around soon. She deserved to have her son back, and Harry deserved to know the devotion and love of this woman who would have given all for him. "Is he...all right? Eating? Sleeping?"

"Working on both," Sirius confirmed, without giving too many details. Lily had enough on her plate without knowing how poorly Harry slept, or that he was throwing up at least once a day and unable to eat even as much as a child half his age.

"Take care of my baby, Sirius," she murmured.

"I will," he promised. "You know I will."

"I do," she nodded sadly. "I just..."

"Want to do it yourself. I know," he nodded.

"If I could just hug him," she whispered. "One time."

"I promise that you will. Much more than just once," he assured her. "Just keep holding on, Lily. Owl me if you need anything."

She kissed him on the cheek in gratitude, then bravely stepped back to the fireplace and Flooed back home. He watched as the green flames vanished, more worried than ever about the family that had brought him into the fold and never treated him as anything but another Potter. He knew there was love enough to get them through this, but at the moment, it nearly felt too bleak to hope.

Harry sat as still as a board at the top of the stairs, barely even breathing as he listened to the quiet voices of the two adults. He had grown thirsty and decided to retrieve a cup of tea from Kreacher, then stopped short when he heard the voices.

Lily Potter didn't know he was here. She couldn't. Sirius undoubtedly thought he was still asleep, as he hadn't screamed his usual morning wake-up this morning. Lily Potter could have no idea her son was just up the stairs listening to her voice. He didn't want to admit it, but there was something soothing about it. He thought perhaps he could listen to it all day, if she didn't have to know about it. And her words...could they be true? Would she really fake this for Sirius? He seemed convinced enough, and they both seemed so...sad.

"Take care of my baby," she had requested. Her baby. Like he mattered. Like she truly did want him. She wanted to hold him, to hug him. Could she mean it? Could it all have been a terrible mistake?

No longer thirsty, he got up as quietly as possible and tiptoed back to his room, climbing beneath the blankets and hiding again before Sirius could discover him.

A/N: This is an awkward chapter and I tried half a dozen times to rewrite it and like it a little more. Unfortunately, this seems to be as good as it gets! Another OC here, plus some Lydia. I know it's slow progress, but Harry is coming around more and more, and to compensate for a gratuitous OC chapter, I plan to double-update this week!

****PLEASE NOTE:** I am terribly sorry for the lack of separations in the last few chapters. I thought by removing the automatic borders, the asterisks remained! I was wrong and I need to go back and fix it!

Chapter 14

For the first time since Sirius had found Harry nearly frozen and starved to death on a park bench, he could completely and honestly say the kid was driving him stark raving mad. He had been polite – almost disturbingly so – and cooperative, prone only to bouts of unpleasantness when he was terrified about something. He had every right to be scared out of his wits, and most of his reactions had been understandable, if a bit difficult to deal with.

This morning, however, Harry was all surly teenager. He had woken in his normal fashion, screaming his poor lungs out, and then promptly proceeding to vomit for five minutes before stuttering out shamed apologies. He eventually calmed enough to come down for breakfast, but that was when Sirius made the mistake of reminding him about the appointment in Muggle London.

Since then, Sirius's sweet, good-natured godson was about as pleasant as an angry hippogriff. There was probably some sort of fear of looking vulnerable and weak there, along with a healthy dose of teenaged pride. Harry was thirteen, after all, and always defensive of his ability to care for himself. And it wasn't that Sirius disagreed; by all approximations, Harry had done remarkably well for himself. But no thirteen-year old boy ought to have cared for himself as long as he did, and it was undeniable that his twelve years of fear and abuse had left lasting scars. The sooner they dealt with it, the better off he would be. The nightmares were too much for anyone to deal with, and they were clearly taking their toll on the already exhausted boy. Sirius had been nearly ready to relent, and then he once more caught the haunted, pained expression on his godson's face, a remnant of his terrified dreams. A bit of

churlishness he could handle; watching his godson endure this day after day was out of the question.

A receptionist greeted them and handed Sirius some paperwork to fill out as they waited for the therapist Remus had arranged. Sirius was a little creative in filling out the forms, hoping he wouldn't have to Confund anyone before this was all said and done.

"Still don't see why you're making me do this," Harry grumbled irritably as he slouched down in his seat. Perhaps Sirius should take it as a good sign that Harry was finally arguing with him; at least it showed he was getting over a little of his fear of being abandoned. He wouldn't have dared speak like this a week ago.

"Sorry, mate. Have to," he answered as simply as possible. This morning he had launched into an alarmingly Remus-like lecture on why it was important for him to talk to someone, and it hadn't gone well. Harry was defensive and annoyed and more than a little put out, and Sirius realised then there was no point trying to convince the boy.

Harry mumbled something else, but Sirius kept on filling out the forms. "Mr. Black?" a voice called after a few more minutes.

"Wait here," Sirius instructed firmly. "I'll speak to her first, then we'll have you come back. Just want to make sure we're all on the up and up, shall we say."

Harry frowned and looked away.

"Do I need to worry about you bolting? I can put a Sticking Charm on your chair," he threatened.

"No," Harry grumbled.

"Good boy," he responded wryly, then stood and followed the therapist back to her office.

"I'm Claire Connors, Mr. Black. It's nice to meet you," the woman introduced herself.

"Sirius Black," he responded in kind. He and Remus had discussed it and didn't think false names were necessary, as Muggles hadn't

heard of Harry Potter and weren't much of a risk for disclosing his not-so-dead status before the Potters were ready.

"I see from the notes my receptionist made you're here to talk about your godson?" she asked, glancing down at the file. A long lock of strawberry blonde hair fell into her face, and she irritably brushed it away and tucked it behind her ear. He was momentarily distracted from the task at hand, struck by her pale skin and delicate freckles. He'd always been one to notice a lovely witch and wasn't a total stranger to dalliances with Muggle girls...and this one was particularly attractive.

"Er, godson, yes," he recovered, forcing fascination away so he could focus on Harry.

"And what seems to be the problem with..."

"Harry," he supplied. "He's...it's a difficult situation," he prefaced. He and Remus had discussed this at length, but he still felt unprepared to explain the rather delicate situation to the therapist without accidentally disclosing anything he could get himself in trouble for. He had also briefed Harry on the story they would tell, and now he could only hope his godson wasn't so upset that he would intentionally sabotage this.

"We have an hour," Claire smiled kindly, "so just take your time."

"I'm afraid it's a terrible story," he warned her. "When Harry was an infant, he and his parents were attacked. The house was set on fire. James and Lily managed to escape mostly unharmed, but we assumed Harry had died. We know now that he was taken in the attack, but the house had collapsed, and the fire was set in Harry's nursery. We just..." he stopped for a moment, not having to fake the emotion as he once more remembered that awful night, this time wondering just how much it still haunted Harry's dreams. He had been so young, but clearly the attack, the failed Killing Curse, and the fire had taken great toll on him.

"That's awful," Claire agreed softly, then jotted something down.

"From what we can gather, he was found sometime after he was taken. He'd been abandoned and left for dead. Since we believed

him dead, there was never any connection made. He was taken to a group home, and then sent to foster care when he was five."

"I see," she frowned thoughtfully. "I take it he was not treated well?"

"No," he answered darkly. "And he ran away when he was ten. He was only found just a few weeks ago, and he came to live with me."

"Why you?" she asked curiously. "Are his parents still living?"

"Yes, they are," he nodded. "I must warn you, though, pushing the issue of his parents is unlikely to get you far, and I've promised him he can remain with me as long as he likes. I won't have him forced into anything."

"Understood," she agreed, "but if I'm going to treat him, I do need to know how he came to live with you rather than his parents."

"He blames them," he grimaced. "I don't believe it's how he truly feels, but he's had a bit of a shock, learning that his parents have been alive all this time and not searching for him. He's had such a terrible time of things," he shook his head. "He also has a younger sister."

"And how did he take the news that his parents had another child after him?"

"Have you ever kicked a puppy, Ms. Connors?"

"Claire," she corrected, cracking a bit of a smile. "That well?"

"You try upsetting that child. He has his mum's eyes, and they turn on you and make you feel lower than a-" he stopped short, realising he was about to say 'flobberworm' It might make sense to a witch, but Claire Connors was no witch.

Claire laughed softly and jotted something else down on her yellow pad of paper. "That's an understandable reaction. A child who grows up feeling unwanted and unloved will be fiercely insecure, as well as possessive of those who he does come to trust. I suspect it will be hard for him to accept sharing his parents with another child, and it also reinforces his idea that his parents neither wanted nor needed him."

Put that way, it made Sirius feel even worse. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, but he wanted Harry to love his sister as she loved him, and the emotional scars may be too great for him to ever overcome.

"I'll start slow today and start to build a rapport with Harry. I must warn you, patients like these can take a long time to show progress. I suspect he has quite a few misconceptions that have been firmly planted in his mind, and it does take time to change those thoughts and those feelings. I'll ask him some simple questions, but how is he adjusting to living with you so far?"

"I'm afraid he's quite angry with me for bringing him here," he admitted, "but he's a very sweet, quiet boy. Remarkably pleasant, excepting today."

"I work with teenagers," she assured him wryly. "I rarely expect pleasant attitudes."

Sirius laughed with her and tried not to notice what a wonderful laugh she had. She was lovely, but he was here for Harry. Harry, who needed one person in his life to be devoted to him and only to him for the time being. "My main concern is his nightmares," he tried to focus himself once more. "He has them every night. They often make him ill."

"Poor child," she sighed. "I'll do everything I can with him. I have quite a bit of experience with traumatised children, but it does take time to work through all of these things. For now, I primarily want to work on building trust with him so he'll feel comfortable speaking with me."

"Best of luck to you there," he couldn't help quipping.

She smiled sadly and jotted something else down on her paper. "A bit reticent, your godson?"

"He's not one for whinging."

"Abused children rarely are."

It was on the tip of his tongue to agree, but he quickly decided against it. That was far too familiar. "Shall I go get him?"

"Yes, please," she nodded. "If he would like you to stay, of course you're welcome to. I find it's usually best if we speak alone, but if Harry would like additional support, then by all means, sit in with us."

A rush of protectiveness washed over Sirius, even with this beautiful woman, and he remembered the pouting face and the irritable mutters and still loved the kid so much he worried how this all might upset him. He wanted to stay and make sure she didn't push too hard, but he doubted very much Harry would let him. "Er, you'll be...gentle with him? He's a good kid, really, but we're still working very hard to make him trust me."

Claire looked up at him and offered another reassuring smile. "He isn't my first abused child, Mr. Black. We'll get on just fine. I promise."

"Sirius," he corrected, absently wondering how many times Claire would have to insist Harry use her given name as well. Knowing Harry, he'd have graduated Hogwarts before that happened.

He found his way out front again and found Harry sitting completely still in his seat. There were books and magazines in the office, but Harry hadn't made a move for any of them while Sirius had been gone. He looked up when Sirius entered the room, then promptly averted his eyes.

"Can you come speak with Claire?" Sirius asked hopefully. "I can sit with you or out here."

Harry said nothing, but from the look on his face, Sirius was quite certain he was unwanted. He stood aside and let Harry walk by him, then settled into one of the chairs to wait for him to emerge.

Twenty minutes later, a decidedly less surly Harry appeared next to Claire. She smiled kindly at her new patient, then beckoned for Sirius. "You can go wait at the...car...", he managed, nearly slipping and mentioning the Apparition Point they'd used this morning. "Be right there, mate." He waited for Harry to step outside before turning back to Claire. "How was he?" he asked nervously.

"Well, you were right about him being quiet," she laughed softly.

"Not too quiet, I hope?"

"No, he was wonderful. It does take him a while to come out of that shell of his, but he was very sweet and polite. I won't tell you anything we discussed without his permission, but I did advise him on some relaxation techniques before he goes to sleep. For now, just continue to do as you've done with him. I can see the two of you are growing quite close already, and he'll need that support as he confronts what happened to him."

"Thank you, very much, Claire."

"Not a problem, Sirius. I'd like to see him again in a week, if he'll agree."

Claire looked up at him then, and he noticed that her eyes were a striking blue he hadn't noticed earlier in her office. That pesky piece of hair had fallen in her face again, and it took all the will-power he possessed not to reach out and tuck it in for her.

He left the office quite certain he would have no trouble bringing Harry back next week.

Lydia slouched down in her seat and pretended to be listening to Remus as he lectured on doxies or something equally boring and pointless. Defense Against the Dark Arts used to be her favourite class, since it was taught by her godfather, but now it tied with Potions and History of Magic for the most massive wastes of her time.

Remus had been watching her carefully for a week, ever since she came back to Hogwarts. He had tried to pass it off as concern, but she knew he was only worried about one thing: The Secret. It used to be that the biggest secret was his true whereabouts the night of a full moon, or the days after when his classes were filled by a substitute while he was ill. Now, The Secret was the existence of her own brother, and she wasn't allowed to speak to anyone. Not Briallen, not Annie, not Hermione, not Ginny. Not a single person, except for Remus.

And Remus was last on her list of people she wanted to speak to at the moment. Remus, who hadn't talked her dad into coming home. Remus, who wouldn't make Harry see reason. Remus, who kept asking her if she was sure she hadn't said anything to anyone.

It hurt more than she wanted to admit that he didn't trust her. She may always get in trouble for speaking out of turn, but she knew better than to tell anyone about Harry until her mum and dad said she could. Coming back from the dead was hardly a simple thing, especially not for a celebrity like Harry Potter. He would be an even bigger deal when everyone found out he faced Voldemort and lived. If Harry wasn't even up for meeting his family, he probably wouldn't take too well to becoming a hero to the whole Wizarding world overnight. She wasn't daft; she understood that she had to keep her mouth shut this time. But it hurt even more that Remus was so concerned about it...so concerned that he wasn't even asking if she was all right, if she was upset about Harry refusing to see her, or about her dad being gone and her mum home all alone.

She didn't begrudge Harry a little attention. Really. She didn't. For twelve years, he'd mostly gotten one or two nights a year - his birthday and Halloween - when everyone thought about him. The rest of the time, her mum, dad, godfather, and Sirius all focused quite entirely on her. By her estimation, it was far past time for Harry to be the centre of attention for a while. But would it be so bad for Remus to talk to her? Or her mum to send her a letter? Or her dad to write promising he'd be home by Christmas? No one was saying anything, and it made her sick to her stomach. It meant nothing was okay and she was quite forgotten. It meant Harry might never come home, and somehow that was nearly as bad as Harry staying dead forever. At least dead, she could believe that he liked her. Alive, she knew he wanted nothing to do with her.

She hated it, and she wanted to hate him. How could he? How could he write her off without ever even meeting her? People liked her well enough; maybe if he'd give her a chance, he wouldn't mind her so much. Wasn't he even a little curious about her? She spent her whole life imagining what he might be like, if he would enjoy Quidditch as much as she did, if they would like the same ice cream sundaes at Fortescue's, if he would be better than her at Potions or perhaps like Herbology as she did. Didn't he wonder those things about her?

A sharp kick underneath the desk caused her to bolt upright in her seat. She turned and glared at Annie, only to find her friend gesturing vaguely towards the front of the room. "Ms. Potter?" Remus was asking expectantly.

"Yes?"

The whole class gasped a little, and her godfather's eyes grew sharp. "The answer to the question, Ms. Potter," he ordered firmly. Normally she would wriggle a bit under a gaze that severe, but she was too angry with him to care if he was disappointed.

"What was the question?" she asked casually.

He clenched his jaw – a sure sign that he was losing his temper. Well, too bad. He

no longer seemed to care about her, so why should she care about upsetting him? "Detention, Ms. Potter, for your failure to pay attention, and ten points from Gryffindor for the attitude. Mr. Lewis, could you answer the question?" he asked, turning his attention to a Ravenclaw student, who of course answered immediately.

Lydia spent the rest of class fuming, ignoring the note Annie kept trying to shove her way. It was undoubtedly asking her what was wrong, since Annie knew better than most how close she was to Remus, but it wasn't as though Lydia could actually tell her anything.

And that was the worst part about all of this. She just wanted someone to listen to her, but all of the adults in her life were preoccupied and everyone else was forbidden. She was just alone, as she never had been before.

"Lydia," her godfather called after her as most of the class filtered out. She just continued on, pretending to ignore her, until the door slammed shut in front of her. She turned with a glare, crossing her arms over her chest in defiance. To her surprise, Remus no longer looked angry, the lines of his face softening into concern. "Care to tell me what that was all about?" he asked expectantly.

"No," she retorted cheekily.

"I know things are difficult right now, Lulu, but you mustn't-"

"Don't tell me what to do," she snapped.

"Lydia," he scolded.

"Has my dad gone home yet?"

Remus sighed and brought a hand up to his temple as though he had a headache. Well, serves him right, she thought grumpily.

"No, Lydia, he hasn't," he answered after a moment.

"I'm going to be late for my next class."

"I'll write you a pass. I'd like you to stay and talk to me. I'm worried about you. I know things are very hard right now, but you can't act out because of it. Your mum and dad have enough to handle right now without having to be concerned with your behaviour."

Furious tears welled up in Lydia's eyes as bitterness surged through her veins. Of course, Remus wasn't really worried about her, he was worried about she was going to upset everyone else. "Then just don't tell them. I know how much you like secrets!"

With that, she threw open the door and stormed away, too upset to stay another moment in his presence. By the time she made it to Transfiguration, the stinging tears were rolling freely down her cheeks, and she had to take a moment to collect herself before she entered the classroom. She shared Charms with Hufflepuff, which meant Briallen was in class with her, but it almost made it worse to have her best friend by her side. Briallen had always been there for her, and they had always told each other everything. Not being allowed to say anything now just made it so much worse, and Briallen would probably start to hate her, too.

When she finally dried the tears and composed herself enough to enter, she didn't think about the time and walked into the classroom. Professor McGonagall was already lecturing, and the whole class turned to watch her walk in. All of Gryffindor gave a collective groan, knowing what was coming. McGonagall might be their Head of House, but she was equally strict with everyone. She had been the Head when her parents were in school, so McGonagall kept an extra close watch on her for signs of mischief.

"Ms. Potter, do you have a pass?" the professor asked expectantly.

"No, Ma'am," she grumbled and slid into her seat next to Briallen.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for your tardiness. See me after class," McGonagall ordered, then promptly turned back to the lecture.

Lydia fought back the tears this time, refusing to let anyone see how utterly shattered she was. "Lydia," Briallen whispered when McGonagall answered a student's question. "Lydia, what happened?"

"I can't tell you," she shook her head.

As expected, Briallen looked hurt. "You can't?" she asked in surprise.

"I lost points in DADA, too," she grumbled.

Briallen's frown deepened. "With Remus?"

"I don't want to talk. I'll lose Gryffindor more points."

As though the whole class heard her, a few of her fellow students turned to glare at her. This time, Lydia didn't even try. She dropped her head onto her desk and ignored the lecture, not even responding when McGonagall scolded her.

"I think she's not feeling well, Professor," Briallen spoke up.

"Then please see Ms. Potter to the Hospital Wing, Ms. Rees," McGonagall ordered. "And next time, Ms. Potter, kindly see Madam Pomfrey instead of disrupting class."

"Come on, Lydia," Briallen insisted as she grabbed Lydia by the arm to drag her off to the Hospital Wing. Excellent, that was just what she needed. Pomfrey would know there was nothing wrong with her, and then she'd be in trouble for skivving. If she was lucky, she could have her third detention before lunch.

"I'm not sick," she grumbled. "Go back to class. I'll go to the dorms."

"You can't!" her friend protested. "Look, I don't know what's happening lately, but you haven't been yourself. Maybe you ought to see Madam Pomfrey even if you aren't feeling poorly. I know something is upsetting you."

"I'm not allowed to talk about it," she shook her head.

"Says who?"

"Can't tell you that, either," she shrugged.

Briallen stopped short and turned harshly to face her, eyes blazing with something Lydia had never seen before. "Did someone do something to you? And you aren't allowed to tell? Because if they did, you have to tell me, or Remus, or somebody!"

"Don't be stupid," she scoffed.

"Is this about your brother?" Briallen guessed, and Lydia stiffened for an instant before remembering that the anniversary wasn't so long ago, and her odd behaviour had started shortly thereafter. "I know you're sad, but-"

"I don't want to talk about it. God, you're such a Hufflepuff. Can't you just leave me alone?"

Well, that finally did it. Briallen stepped back as though Lydia had slapped her, then promptly turned around and hurried back to the classroom. Hot, miserable shame bubbled up to Lydia's throat, and she cursed this whole miserable day and this stupid, miserable school and her selfish, miserable family. Fine, then. If everyone wanted to hate her today, she wasn't going to bother. She wiped at the tears, then stalked off to her dormitory to climb beneath the covers and hide the rest of the day.

A/N: I said double update this week and this hardly counts. I had the horrible heinous week from hell and haven't mustered up the motivation to do anything! To make up for it, I promise the next update will be by Tuesday. And this is the final chapter of setup for the good stuff to start happening. **WARNING: There is going to be extreme foolishness in this chapter and you will be frustrated by one character's continued bad behaviour. I make no apologies...there are reasons for everything.

Chapter 15

Sirius glanced over at his godson and smirked a little to himself as he noticed the boy clearly fighting sleep as he sat curled up on the sofa with a book in hand. He had become a rather voracious reader of late, reading through the spellbooks as though they were novels. Of course, he skipped over certain subjects (like his father and godfather, he had little use for plants and history) and couldn't be bothered by extensive theory, but given the right material, he soaked up knowledge like Lily had as a student. Claire had suggested a bit of tutoring to catch him up to his peers and build his confidence, and it seemed to be working. Most of their afternoons now were spent practising new spells with the spare wand Sirius found (and thoroughly checked for jinxes), and the change in Harry was already remarkable.

Harry seemed to be a unique blend of his parents and would undoubtedly bring great relief to Lily, who was constantly fretting over Lydia's school performance. Harry didn't have his mum's devotion, but he did have an abundance of curiosity coupled with raw natural talent. James and Sirius had both gotten on with their natural talent and little else, but Harry had a decent work ethic. That combination of skill and drive would certainly make him a formidable force. The fact that technically using magic was illegal hadn't seemed to worry him too much, either, which would give Lily palpitations but confirmed Sirius's suspicions that Harry was more like his dad than he knew. Sirius had always rather thought the ability to use magic undetected was one of the few perks of growing up under the secrecy charms of his paranoid father, and he was happy to induct his godson into the ways of mischief.

Just a few hours ago, Harry had successfully levitated a book across the room. They had started, as all first years do, with a feather graciously donated by Rocco. Harry did it perfectly with only a few

attempts, and now he was moving heavier objects with near-perfect control and for longer periods of time. It was nearly time to start teaching him a few (mostly harmless) hexes and truly initiating him into Marauder life.

After a good night's rest, though, judging by his drooping eyes.

"You're looking knackered, mate," he smiled at his godson, who looked up and rubbed sheepishly at his eyes. "You know, you could haul yourself up the stairs and climb into bed."

"I wanted to finish this. I'm behind," he frowned. "What if I never catch up to

people my age?"

"I very much doubt that's a possibility. And even if it was, there were a few members of my family who may not have ever even learned to read. All that inbreeding, you know. They still made it through Hogwarts, though."

"Thanks, Sirius," Harry rolled his eyes. "Now I feel better."

"Thought you might," he grinned. "Now off with you," he ordered with false authority.

"Yes, Sir," Harry saluted.

It certainly wasn't the first time Harry had called him 'Sir,' but it was the first time he'd done so mockingly. Sirius nearly burst with pride for the boy as he trudged up the stairs to ready himself for bed.

Feeling satisfied and optimistic, Sirius decided a cup of tea and the rest of the newspaper would be the perfect way to end the day. He was just rising from his chair when he heard the crack of Apparition. There were only a select few people who knew how to Apparate through the wards here, so he knew almost immediately who it would be.

"James," he sighed as the haggard form of his best mate appeared before him. "Startled me, mate. What are you doing here?"

"Remus has just been to see me. Again, I should say."

Sirius glanced upstairs and hoped Harry had been tired enough to fall right to sleep. From the look on James's face, the visit from Remus hadn't been a pleasant one. Remus had a certain talent for making one feel like an absolute heel, and though Sirius was quite certain James needed that right now, he also knew better than to push too much too quickly. James was brilliant, truly, but he could be thick-headed when he wanted to be, and it was often a more delicate task to bring him around. "Was our friend the professor as helpful as always?" he asked jovially, deciding to approach this cautiously.

James didn't crack a smile. Instead, he ran his hand through his hair as he used to do. Lily had always scolded him for it, and now he mostly did it as a nervous habit on the rare occasion he didn't feel completely sure of himself. "How...how is Harry?" he asked fretfully.

"He's all right, Prongs. He's a good lad. We're working on some spells together."

"He's doing magic?" James asked in surprise.

"Quite brilliantly," he nodded.

"Is he sleeping? Eating? Is he...Remus told me how sick he was, when you found him. He said it took him days to come round."

Those weren't necessarily details Sirius felt compelled to share now – or ever – with Harry's parents, of all people. Remus was probably attempting to guilt James into trying harder to make amends with his family, but James already felt guilty. More guilt was probably the last thing he needed at the moment. "He was very ill," he confirmed. "The cold did a number on him, but he's sorted out now. He'll be all right."

James didn't appear even remotely cheered. In fact, he looked more distressed than ever. "I do love him, Sirius," he murmured. "More than anything."

"Course you do, James, you're-"

"I wrote him these letters," his friend blurted. "Never told anyone that."

"Like your dad did?"

"Mmm," he nodded. "Even after...I kept writing. Kept them at the Manor."

Sirius didn't have the slightest clue what James was trying to tell him, and he felt the need to interpret this was quite urgent. Everything so far had sounded good...a step in the right direction...and yet James looked bereft.

"I've brought them," James continued. "Will you give them to him? Not now, but when you think he's ready?"

"Perhaps you ought to do that yourself, Prongs," he suggested carefully, still watching for signs that his friend was about to crack. "It might do him good."

James immediately snapped to attention, the haunted look in his eyes quickly shifting to vehement defiance. "No," he shook his head. "No. I want Harry to stay with you."

"He's welcome to as long as-"

"Forever," James cut him off. "I've left Lily and Lydia. You knew that, didn't you?"

"I...yes...Lily said..." he stammered, unable to come up with an appropriate response.

"Right then," James nodded. "You're good for him. You've taken care of him."

Just...stop trying to convince him to come with us, or that... Just let him stay. You'll take care of him, won't you?"

"Of course I will," he answered immediately. "But James, you can't-"

"This is where he belongs," James cut him off.

"I think it's up to Harry where he ought to be," he countered, his irritation towards James growing. Harry had enough on his plate right now without worrying about his own father being a miserable

fool. James ought to be rallying around his boy right now, and even if Harry wouldn't let him near, he ought to be the one worrying about Harry's mental well-being, not Sirius.

"No," James shook his head. "Harry's confused right now. We need to do what's right by him."

"You're talking nonsense. Why don't you sit and tell me what's going on. What

did Remus say to you?"

"Nothing. It isn't important," James shook his head.

"It must be, for you to turn up here talking like this," Sirius countered. "Come on,

Prongs. You know Moony. He can be rather harsh. Whatever he said, I'm sure it isn't as bad as all that. Lily understands, even if she's unhappy with you. She never stays angry with you long. And Lydia will get over it, too, if you give her a bit of time. She doesn't hold a grudge, you know."

"It doesn't matter," James repeated. "I just need to know that you'll take care of Harry and keep him here. It's the right thing to do. I just...I just want you to give him the letters. Later. So he knows. I just...I want him to understand."

"Now listen here," Sirius demanded irritably, annoyed that his friend would just give up like this. James Potter was not a man to back down easily, and the James Potter he knew never would have given up his son without a fight. At least Lily had written and come to check in on them to make sure her son was faring all right in his new life; James couldn't be bothered to even pick up a quill to see about his son. "Harry can stay here as long as he wants, but I'll not be having him here because you've made some foolish decision not to be in his life, or Lily's and Lydia's. Now sit down before you do something else completely idiotic."

"No," James shook his head. "I've stayed long enough. Harry could come down and see me."

"James," he tried to argue, but before he could get another word in, James spun on his heel and Disapparated.

Sirius stood frozen in shock for about two seconds before he realised Harry may have heard this. He hurried upstairs and knocked briefly on his godson's door, giving him only seconds to mumble something before he pushed it open. He had expected rage, or tears, or something...but instead, he found Harry slowly and methodically taking clothes out of his closet and folding them on the bed.

Potters were going to be the death of him, he was sure. "Hey, mate," he greeted casually and approached the bed. Harry was entirely absorbed in his task, sniffing every now and then, but not crying as he packed away things in the backpack Sirius had bought him. Using the distraction to his advantage, Sirius began to take items out of the pack and used his wand to restore them to their appropriate places, slightly amused when Harry didn't catch on. "What are you doing?" he asked amiably.

"Packing," Harry grumbled.

"Mmm, I see that. I haven't had a holiday in ages. Where are we going?"

"I'm leaving."

"I see," Sirius nodded and removed another shirt from the pack and sent it back to the closet. "Going to be a bit hard without your clothes."

"I'm packing them n- Sirius!" he cried, finally realising what was happening.

"Sit down, Love," Sirius ordered, removing the backpack from the bed and setting it at his feet. "No use pretending you didn't hear every word he said."

Harry's resolve not to cry seemed to falter a bit as he slowly sat down next to his godfather. Still, he kept his lips tightly pressed together and said nothing.

"Your dad is my best friend," Sirius began after a long moment. "Best friend I've ever had. When I ran away from home when I was sixteen, he and his family took me in. He never said a word about it. I always knew I was welcome there. He's seen me through every stupid thing I've ever done...and that's quite a long list, I'll have you know. He's wonderful, Harry, but he's also very stubborn. He'd have to be. Lily wouldn't look at him for about six years, and he still somehow talked the girl into marrying him."

Harry made some little grunt and turned his face away.

Sirius sighed and brought his arms around this boy he loved so much. He was going to kill James himself, best friend or not, for planting doubts in this kid's head. Harry had enough things to work out without James acting a fool on top of it. "He's only got it in his head that he's bad for you," he murmured.

"He doesn't want me," Harry argued, his voice wavering a bit.

"Rubbish," Sirius shook his head, reaching over to tug at Harry's chin and finding himself thoroughly rebuked. It stung a little, but he charged forward anyway. "I want you," he said simply. "I want you very much, mate. And I think you know that."

"Then why doesn't he?"

The vulnerability in his tone was nearly Sirius's undoing. This was telling, right here, of Harry's real heart. He had been so quiet on the subject of his parents, refusing to speak about them, but this was certainly not a child who wanted nothing to do with his family. A child who didn't want his family would be overjoyed to hear his father had given up any hope of raising him again, but Harry was quite clearly devastated. "He does, Harry," he answered quietly. "I promise that he does."

"He said you could keep me!" he protested miserably. "He doesn't want me at all! He's just giving me away! He doesn't even care!"

"Harry," Sirius tried to calm him. "I'm still quite confused about what happened downstairs, but your father is obviously out of sorts. He isn't usually like that. Whatever Remus said is obviously bothering him," he tried to reason. "Remus is....very wise, but sometimes he's

a bit too much, at least for dolts like your dad and me. Sometimes you have to be a bit gentle with us. I think perhaps he pushed James a little too far today."

"It doesn't matter," Harry shook his head. "He doesn't want me back. I knew he didn't. Not really."

"I think your dad wants you so badly he's losing his mind," he countered sadly and brushed his hand through Harry's hair, smiling ruefully as he remembered James's unconscious gesture. "I watched him without you for twelve years, mate. He never got over losing you. None of us did, but especially not James."

"Then why is he so miserable that I'm back?"

Sirius tightened his hold on the boy and brought him a bit closer. "He isn't miserable that you're back, mate. He's miserable that you were ever gone at all. As awful as it was to lose you, it was comforting to think you were safe somewhere that no one could hurt you again. Finding out that you'd been on your own, that people were hurting you..." he trailed off, unable to find the words to fully explain how truly terrible it was. Harry undervalued himself far too much; he couldn't possibly comprehend the feelings his suffering stirred in them all. Someday, when Harry no longer needed him as he did now, Sirius vowed to himself to find each and every person who had harmed his godson. It was the only way he'd be able to live with himself. "No more of this rubbish about no one wanting you, all right?" he asked, shaking himself from dark thoughts of revenge.

Harry was quiet for a very long time, but Sirius was coming to know and understand these silences. He could feel the tension in his godson, and he knew the kid was thinking very hard on something. There was something he wanted to say, and so Sirius waited patiently. "Claire says," Harry finally began slowly, "that in my dream, where my mum is screaming for me..."

"Yes?" Sirius asked expectantly.

"Did they really think I was dead?" he asked, turning his face upward and gazing at his godfather with those perfect eyes of his filled with tears.

Sirius fought back his own tears as he nodded. "We had to hold your mum back. She wanted to run in there, mate, and there was no way for anyone to get inside with being caught by the fire."

"What about my dad?"

Sirius shuddered and fought the urge to retreat away from these terrible memories. He'd lived a life that will filled with all sorts of unpleasantness, but the night they lost Harry was still the worst night of his life. Even with Harry safe and sound beside him, the memory of his best friend sobbing and retching for his lost child...it would haunt Sirius until he died. He had no desire to relive that night, but Harry needed to know. He had to know how much he was loved, and how much his supposed death had ripped them all apart. "His world was shattered, Harry," he answered quietly. "Remus and I both had to get him off the ground. He didn't want to leave you."

Harry didn't speak again for a few moments. "Did he really leave my mum and sister?" he asked after a long silence.

"Not forever, Harry."

"He shouldn't have done that."

"No," he agreed. "He shouldn't. People do...very stupid things when they're upset."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, then turned to look up at his godfather. "Do you think...do you think Lydia is all right?"

Sirius didn't realise it was possible to love this kid more, but his heart clenched painfully at the goodness that existed in a child who had suffered so much in his brief lifetime. "I'm certain she is," he nodded. "Remus is at school with her. He looks after her."

Harry nodded, then glanced down at the backpack. "I guess I should unpack that."

"I think that's a good idea. Can I leave you to it? I have an errand I need to run."

"All right," Harry agreed. "And...I'm sorry. For packing my stuff."

"Don't give it another thought." Sirius squeezed his shoulder and then released him and climbed off the bed. When he left, he closed the door tight behind him and headed to the sitting room to Disapparate. He went straight to Potter Manor and instinctively wandered out to the garden, where he found James sitting on the grass staring blankly at his broom. His friend looked up when he saw Sirius approach, but he said nothing.

"All right, you said your peace," Sirius began. "Now it's your turn to listen. I don't know what Remus said to you, but I don't bloody well care. Harry came back from the dead, James. And he's the most spectacular kid. He's smart, he's talented, and he has Lily's heart. But he's frightened, and it's taking him time to understand that all his life has been a lie. You have a very confused kid who is trying so hard to sort out his head, and if you don't stop acting like a fool, you're going to miss your chance to be his dad again."

"I don't deserve to be his dad," James snapped. "I don't deserve to be anyone's dad."

"I'm starting to agree with you," Sirius shot back, "but unfortunately that's up to your children. Since they're both a bit thickheaded, I reckon they'll decide they want you around."

"If you're just here to insult me you can-"

"You're listening, not speaking," Sirius cut him off. "We all let you run off because we understand you're feeling guilty. But we all feel awful, Prongs, and we're all doing our best to move on. Stop being a selfish bastard and think about your family."

"I am thinking about them," James defended himself. "I do nothing but think about them. It's just that they deserve better than me."

"Perhaps they do," Sirius agreed. "But you're what they have. And coincidentally, you're also the one they want."

"Harry doesn't."

"Is that why he was miserable when he heard you offering to hand him over to me?"

James had the decency to look guilty. "I didn't mean for him to hear," he said quietly.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't say awful things with him in the house," Sirius retorted.

"I don't know what you want me to say, Sirius."

"I don't care what you say. I care what you do. Take care of your family. Simple as that."

"They don't need me for that," James shook his head. "You said yourself Harry is doing better. He and Lydia have Lily. And you and Remus."

"I never thought I would be able to say I'm ashamed of you," he shook his head in disgust.

"Yes, well, now you all have something in common."

Sirius fantasised for a long moment about some of those hexes he taught Harry today. His hand itched for his wand, but he kept his temper for now, knowing his anger was not what James truly needed right now. What he needed was the truth. "Do you remember what you said to me the night I played that awful prank on Snape? When I sent him to the Whomping Willow?" he asked rhetorically. "You told me that my pride was going to cost me everything. Think about that, James, before you wake up and find your family has gone on without you."

He didn't wait for a response and Disapparated from the manor, leaving James to sulk in silence.

"Sirius, would you mind stepping back with me for a moment?" Claire Connors asked as both she and Harry appeared in the waiting room where Sirius had been sitting. He looked worriedly to his godson, who seemed a bit wan and pale, then glanced up at Claire again in askance. "Harry has said it's all right for us to talk for a moment, right, Harry?" she asked gently.

Harry nodded, still looking glum and keeping his eyes fixed on the carpet. Sirius jumped out of his seat and stepped over, giving his

godson's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Be right back, mate," he promised, then followed Claire back to her office.

It was only Harry's third appointment with the muggle therapist today, but after the mess with James, it had obviously been a difficult one.

"Have a seat," Claire smiled warmly at him and gestured to the comfortable chair across from her desk. There was some sort of muggle board game still laid out at a small table in her office, and Sirius wondered just what they'd been up to for the last hour. "Some kids do better with a bit of play first," she explained, following his gaze to the game. "Harry opens up more if he isn't pushed to do it."

Sirius nodded as though he understood, when really this was all so very foreign to him. Bloody board games? That hardly seemed a good reason to pay a person. He could play Exploding Snap or Gobstones with Harry, and they'd probably have far more fun with magic than these dull muggle things.

"He's doing well," she continued, "but we talked about a few things today and I

asked his permission to discuss it with you."

"All right," he nodded uncertainly. "Er...should I be worried?"

"No," she chuckled softly. "He's processing some difficult things at the moment. He told me about his dad."

"Bloody idiot," Sirius cursed.

"He could probably a little therapy himself," she admitted with a soft smile. "But you should know, all of this is completely natural. And I think perhaps if Harry's dad were to understand a little better about where his son is coming from and what he's feeling, he might not feel so terrible."

"What do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

"From what I can gather from speaking with Harry, his dad is struggling with a lot of self-loathing over what happened to Harry. Guilt...it's a difficult thing, Sirius, and not always entirely rational. But the perception that Harry is angry with him or blames him probably

makes it nearly unbearable for him, especially as the father who feels it was his responsibility to keep his family safe."

Sirius nodded his agreement but still didn't understand. "I've tried to convince him it was no one's fault, but I'm not certain he believes that."

"Actually, I believe he does," she countered. "Anger is a much easier feeling than fear. Anger...it gives us power, doesn't it? Fear takes it away."

"I'm not following," he shook his head.

"Harry is a smart and perceptive boy. I think, in his heart, he knows that his

parents didn't choose to abandon him. I don't think he's truly angry with them."

"He's not?" he raised an eyebrow. "He certainly does a good impression of it."

"Yes," she laughed shortly. "But think about it, Sirius. What is it Harry has likely wanted all his life? A family, isn't it? And now suddenly he has one. It's the same way he feels about you – that this is too good to be true. Except with his parents, it's even harder to come to terms with. I believe that Harry is trying to protect himself," she explained. "Rejection from you would hurt, but he would recover, in time. Rejection from his parents is another matter entirely. If he never faces them, he never faces the possibility of their eventual abandonment."

"But they would never!" he protested.

"Yes, but Harry needs to be convinced of his self-worth, not of his parents'

blamelessness. I think it's important for everyone to understand that much of his hurt and anger is just misdirected fear."

Sirius's mind reeled at the revelation, but it did make sense. Harry was immensely clever, and it seemed impossible that he would be unable to understand what happened that night and his parents'

innocence in all of it. Of course he wasn't expected to be entirely rational about it, but even so, anger where there could be no blame seemed entirely out of character for his otherwise generous godson. Fear made far more sense, and in some ways, it would probably be a comfort to Lily and James to know that their son was not truly angry with them.

"Thank you, Claire," he managed. "You've...that's brilliant."

She flushed, just slightly, but nodded her thanks. "I think you ought to work with him on self-worth, as much as you can. Right now, I think Harry fears that you love him because you love his father, and that perpetuates these feelings of being unwanted and fearing abandonment. You and I both know that isn't true, but the more you can convince Harry that he's loved for being himself, the more I think he'll open up to the idea of seeing his mum and dad."

"I'll try," he agreed eagerly, encouraged that perhaps this was easier to fix than he previously believed.

"You're doing brilliantly, Sirius. Just keep at it," she smiled encouragingly.

He was feeling in over his head and a bit distracted as he stepped out of the office, but as soon as he spotted Harry, any irritation melted away. His godson looked so worried and guilty, so eager for affection as he quickly and anxiously stood. Sirius just smiled at him, hoping to ease a few of his fears, and then gently ruffled his hair.

"You know what sounds good?"

"What?"

"Ice cream."

"It's cold out," Harry frowned.

"We'll take it home then," Sirius decided. "Yeah?"

A little of the tension fled Harry's face as he nodded. "Yeah," he agreed.

It was no Fortescue's, but they found a muggle place down the street and filled their cups with an abundance of flavours and toppings before Apparating home. They sat in mostly content silence and ate their ice cream, Harry flipping through a spellbook while Sirius contemplated his next move.

With Harry still absorbed in the book, Sirius excused himself and wandered upstairs to the attic. He'd been up just recently to retrieve pictures to show Harry, but he'd only picked a few of them right off the top of the stack, and he knew he had many others. Lily was constantly taking photos, to the point that James had grown irritated, but it meant Sirius received a set of just about every single one she took.

He smiled fondly as he gazed down at one of himself and Harry engaged in what appeared to be a serious conversation. Harry was too young to even speak properly yet, but he'd been quite the babbler as an infant. Sirius made a great game of it, pretending they were discussing world affairs and wizarding history as Harry giggled in delight.

Such a happy kid Harry had been once. So entirely aware of the adults whose lives revolved around him, so trusting that they would love and protect him. Such a very far cry from the child desperately afraid of desertion.

A new stack of photos in hand, Sirius returned downstairs and sat on the sofa next to Harry. "We used to make up games together, you and I," he told his godson.

"We did?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Well, to be fair, I suppose I was mostly making them up. Not that you weren't quite advanced for your age," he teased. "But you always seemed to enjoy them."

"What sorts of games?"

"You very much liked to splash Padfoot," he informed him wryly, having demonstrated his Animagus abilities without fully explaining the story behind them. "Anytime I'd give you a bath, you'd get me sopping wet."

Harry laughed a little at that. "I did?"

"Mm, you did," he nodded, then proceeded to flip through the photos and explain each. He had carefully selected the ones Lily had taken without either or her James in them, just Sirius and his little godson. Merlin, the kid had been fun. He'd tried so very hard not to think of that for these last twelve years, but spending time with Harry had always made him forget the horrors of the war and reminded him why they were fighting at all.

He flipped next to a picture of Harry zooming about on his broom, Sirius trailing close behind as he kept watch on the little daredevil.

"James," he began carefully after a moment, "was quite a good Chaser when we were at Hogwarts."

Harry's face immediately sank, but Sirius forged ahead.

"Never really made you for one, though," he added, hoping to show Harry, in some small way, that he did not expect – or want – him to be his father.

"Really?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"I gave you this broom when you were a year old, and within a week, you were zooming around your house. You were an excellent flier, mate. Always thought you'd make a great Seeker. It's not all about genetics, you know."

"Yeah," his godson agreed half-heartedly. "I...I don't think I'm very much like him," he added after a moment.

"Then you aren't," Sirius responded easily. "Merlin knows I'm nothing like my father. At least, I hope not," he shuddered.

"But you like James."

"I like all sorts of people, Harry, and all of them are quite different. Why should I

want you to be just like someone else? Seems a bit dull to me."

Harry was quiet for another long moment, and Sirius knew he was working something out in his head and working up the courage to say. "No one ever liked me before," he finally said.

Sirius had once been hit by a Bludger, straight to the stomach. He thought it felt a little better than hearing those words out of his godson's mouth. "That's because people are very stupid. More's the pity for them, I'd say," he managed. He wrapped a careful arm around Harry's shoulders and drew him in close. "I'm not so good at all of this," he admitted. "But I loved you when you were a baby, and I love you even more now. The conversation's much more stimulating now that you use words," he teased.

Harry laughed, but it was muffled as he pressed his head against his godfather's shoulder. He mumbled something in response, and Sirius didn't have to hear it to know what it was.

Sirius held him tight for another moment, then pressed a light kiss to the top of his head and released him. "Let's practise some magic," he suggested. "Those spellbooks are dreadfully boring."

"All right," Harry agreed. "Sirius?"

"Mmm?"

"Are you going to ask Claire out?"

"Am I going to what?" Sirius nearly choked.

"Well...you like her, don't you?" his godson asked nervously.

"Of course I do. She's helped us a lot," he answered diplomatically.

"No, you like Claire," Harry corrected, as only a teenage boy could. It was so refreshingly normal, and for an instant, Harry was just like any other young boy.

"Don't be absurd. Think we need to find you a hobby, mate. Clearly you're spending too much time thinking."

"Come on, Sirius! I'm not blind, you know."

"Do wear rather thick glasses, though."

"She's very pretty, isn't she?" Harry pressed, apparently not willing to let this particular issue go. It was strange, really...of course he was attracted to Claire, but he thought he'd done a better job than that at hiding it, especially from Harry.

"Is she?" he scratched his head. "Hadn't noticed."

"You're always staring at her," Harry countered.

"On second thought. Maybe a snack."

"We just had ice cream."

"I know, but with food in your mouth, perhaps you'll be quiet."

Harry just grinned at this, apparently relaxing now that Sirius had shown he wasn't offended by the interrogation into his love-life, no matter how disconcerting.

"She likes you, too, you know," Harry added.

This time, Sirius couldn't pretend he wasn't interested. "Does she?" he perked up a bit.

"Mhmm," he nodded. "Her eyes look different when she sees you."

"Different how?"

"Like she's really happy to see you."

Sirius frowned and thought on that for a moment. He hadn't thought there was anything between them, other than a bit of attraction on his end. He'd be lying if he claimed he hadn't thought of it, but truly, he wasn't interested in getting involved with a Muggle. Or anyone, for that matter. He liked women, and he enjoyed seeing them, but it always turned into more trouble than it was worth. Women wanted to worm their way into his life, and there were few people he cared to share the most intimate parts of his life with. It always fell apart when he refused to share those deep thoughts and emotions, and so he'd found relationships too much a burden. No matter how attracted he was to Claire – and how intrigued, on learning she might share the same feelings – it wasn't a wise move.

"Harry," he sighed. "Claire is very pretty, and I do like her...probably more than I should," he admitted. "But she's a Muggle."

"So?" Harry frowned. "I thought you liked them."

"I do. But sometimes it isn't as easy as all that. Muggles aren't supposed to know about us, and it would be very hard for Claire to understand our world," she explained.

"Couldn't you tell if you were dating her?"

"Well, yes," he conceded, "but it does come as a shock, doesn't it?" he reminded him. "Think about how you felt when you learned about magic. It would be just as difficult for Claire. She might not even believe it. You had done accidental magic, so you knew something was amiss. Claire spent her whole life without a clue that magic exists."

"Claire would understand," Harry countered confidently. "She's good at stuff like that. I think she'd be confused, but she'd listen to us. And she would believe you, Sirius."

"Well, whether she would or wouldn't, she's your therapist. It wouldn't be proper. I'm hardly the one to spout ethics to you, mate, but it could cause all sorts of problems. Suppose I asked her out and we didn't get on. She might not want to see you anymore, or vice versa."

"Oh," Harry frowned.

"Don't give me that look," Sirius shook his head. "Claire is quite pretty, but that's all there is to it. You're my godson, and I'm rather fond of you."

"Yeah, I know," Harry grinned sheepishly.

"Good. No worrying about this, then."

"But what if you did get on?" Harry pressed, obviously not quite ready to give up yet. "Then she could know about magic, and it would be a lot easier to talk to her."

Sirius frowned again and tried to puzzle out what his godson was thinking. This wasn't just some sort of whim; obviously Harry had given this some thought. "Is something the matter?" he asked worriedly. "Are you having trouble talking to her?"

"No, it's...it's nothing like that," Harry shook his head. "But I just thought...if you like her and she likes you, I don't want to be in the way. I want you to be happy, too."

It was amazing, really, that after all he'd been through, Harry was still, at heart, a sweet kid who put others before himself. "Harry," he said quietly. "You are not ever in the way. Understand?"

Harry coloured and nodded.

"Besides," Sirius added, feeling the need to lighten the mood before sending Harry on his way. "Imagine the outrage if I started seeing a Muggle. All those poor witches who would never have a chance. A real tragedy. I just couldn't do that to them."

"Terribly noble of you."

"It's my curse. Now, let's do some magic."

A/N: The usual thanks to all my readers and reviewers....you're awesome. Next chapter should be up in about a week!

Chapter Sixteen

Four weeks, Lily thought miserably as she scrubbed at her counters – the Muggle way, to relieve her anxiety. Four weeks since they had found Harry, four weeks since James was last home, four weeks since she had laid eyes on the little boy she had loved and lost. It seemed impossible that such a miracle had brought so much sadness, and yet a month ago, she had a family, had a husband, had someone beside her in bed each night. Now there was silence and guilt and ever-increasing fear.

What if James never came home? What if Harry never came home? How could she live with the knowledge that her son wanted nothing to do with her? How could she accept that he was alive and well but still apart from her?

She had been so sure all of it was temporary. James could be short-sighted, but he would see that he was wrong and come back to her. Harry might be hurt, but he would come to understand how much he was loved. Now, with every day that passed, it seemed far less likely that either of them would come to their senses. Like it or not, Lily had to face the possibility that Lydia would come home for Christmas with a divided family. Four Potters in three different homes. And what if Lydia didn't choose this one? What if she wanted her dad? The two had always been so close, and James might be a terrible fool, but if Lydia went to him, he would never turn her away.

The solitude was breaking her down, and the fear of facing a holiday without her family around her sent fresh tears down her cheeks. Even when her parents died all those years ago, she hadn't felt this alone. When the phone rang and Petunia delivered the terrible news, James had been beside her in an instant. He remained there through everything, just as he had when they lost Harry. And now it was just her. No parents to offer advice, no sister who would speak to her long enough to offer solace, no husband to hold her when she missed her baby so badly she could hardly breathe.

It was a miracle to have Harry back. Every night she breathed a prayer of thanks that he still lived. But there was no denying that her

life had been easier a month ago, when Harry was gone but the memories were beautiful and untainted. She never wanted to go back to that, never again wanted to face the world without him, but why could she never have the people she loved most all together, happy, as they were meant to be?

She scrubbed harder at an imaginary spot and tried to force away thoughts of self-pity. It would get her nowhere, she knew, and she could only keep going and keep hoping somehow this would turn out right.

Just when she finally decided to give up the obsessive cleaning, she heard the screech of an owl and looked up to see the large bird land gracefully on the windowsill. Instead of tapping, he just glared irritably at the closed glass, and she frowned as she recognised the bird – and that particular mannerism. It had been many, many years since the Great Gray perched outside her window. It was an odd sort of bird, too large for most wizards and witches, but remarkably hardy and loyal.

With a pang, she recalled precisely how long it had been since she last saw this bird's owner: twelve years. Twelve years, but she could never forget the owl who so dutifully carried the long letters shared between dear friends. In truth, Caleano had no letters to carry in much longer than twelve years. Their friendship died with the right combination of hateful words and betrayed trust, but it wasn't until Harry's death that she abandoned all notions of ever speaking to him again. She had sworn, even after she married James, that she would always be there if he found his way back to the light, that she would always be his friend should he choose that path.

There was only one thing she could not forgive him for.

"Lily, please," he begged her, hands outstretched, face contorted in agony. "Please, I didn't know. You can't believe I knew."

"Shut up," she demanded. "Stop speaking to me. I never want to hear you speak again."

"Lily," he pleaded desperately. But his cries meant nothing to her. His pain could not begin to compare to hers. Whatever guilt he felt, whatever loss he was feeling over their ruined friendship could not even scratch the surface of her grief. He would never understand

what it meant to lose a child. He could never understand the depth of love, the feeling that her tiny baby boy was a part of her, that a part of her had been carved away and cut up with him gone.

"I never want to see you again, or hear your name. You claimed once that you loved me, but I know now that's not true. You don't love anyone. You never have. You never will. You're incapable of feeling love. No one who loved me could do this to me. All you know is hate...hate that I chose someone over you. You hate me so much that you would take away everything from me...everything."

"No," he shook his head frantically. "Lily, I swear, I didn't know! I didn't know it would be you! When I learned that it was you, I went to Dumbledore, I changed sides, I tried everything I could to stop him and to protect you!"

"Then why is my son dead?" she screamed, her heart shattering in her chest with the devastation of it all. Her first best friend, her once-constant companion...he had done this to her, he had betrayed her and stolen her son from her. The boy she discovered magic with was a murderer, and not just of muggleborns, not just of Voldemort's enemies, but of her son, her baby. "You killed him! You...you..." she could bear it no longer and dropped to her knees, retching miserably on the aged wood before her. All she could think was the fire, the flames that consumed her sweet infant, and her best friend had played a part. Her best friend was the reason Harry died, and she had never been so tempted to turn her wand on herself and end it all right now to spare herself another ounce of this pain, another moment of living in a world where innocent babies were killed and friends turned on another. "How could you?" she sobbed. "My baby."

"I tried, Lily," he vowed hoarsely, sounding nearly as ripped apart as she felt.

"You knew who he was. You knew what he would do."

"Not to you. It was never meant to be you."

She retched again with the knowledge that if it hadn't been her, it would have been another mother, and he would not have cared. He damned her without knowing it would be her, but he damned her all the same. "I wish you were dead," she whispered fiercely.

"Lily," he begged once more.

"James saved your life. He risked his own to save you, and in return you killed our son. I wish he had been as petty and cruel as you. I wish he had let you die."

"Lily," he choked. "Please."

"Never look at me again. Do not speak to me. Do not speak my name. Are we understood?"

There was a long pause, and for the first time in her life, she felt no pity at that lost, abandoned look, that haunted, fearful gaze. He deserved everything he had ever gotten. She no longer felt compassion for a boy abused and forgotten by the world. He made his choice, and he no longer deserved any kindness. He could have chosen differently. She had given him every opportunity to turn away, and in the end, he betrayed her. Worse than that, he destroyed her.

"Are we understood?" she repeated, her voice as cold as she could manage while the tears continued to fall. Eyes that once cried for Severus Snape now wept only for her son, for a baby boy full of promise who was wiped out of this world by a man she had once called friend.

He was pale and miserable, but he nodded his consent. "We're understood."

He abided by the terms of their agreement for twelve years. She had fought Dumbledore – fought him hard – when he appointed the man at Hogwarts. Her rage rivalled even that of James and Sirius, and they understood why. After all, they had all been deceived by someone meant to love them. James and Sirius were betrayed by Pettigrew, and she was betrayed by Snape.

But at least Pettigrew was in Azkaban. Snape was walking free, allowed to teach young, impressionable students. Dumbledore had sworn he was reformed, but it was the one time Lily had railed against her former mentor's judgment.

So why on earth might Severus Snape send a letter now? Why would he write now, of all times? He couldn't possibly know...they

had sworn Lydia to secrecy...she knew she couldn't tell a soul at Hogwarts.

Lily's hands trembled as she realised any note from Severus now could only be bad news. She reluctantly accepted the parchment and quickly untied it.

L –

I know we agreed long ago never to correspond again, but I believe the time has come to make an exception. I feel it is my duty to seek you out first no matter how unwelcome my communication. Your daughter, while ill-attentive and prone to distraction even on the best of days, has recently begun to act out in a way that can no longer be ignored. Her behaviour has surpassed disruptive and become dangerous. She has earned three detentions for reckless behaviour and lack of judgment in my class alone in the last week. Another outburst such as the one today, and I will have no choice but to speak with the Headmaster about more serious measures. She is a danger to herself and her classmates, and I have admittedly been lenient on her because of her connection to you. I owe you a great many debts that can never be repaid, but I will begin here by asking you to take control of Lydia's behaviour before further transgressions force me to hand the matter to Dumbledore and recommend suspension or even expulsion. The other professors have taken note of her recalcitrant attitude, and I urge you to remedy the problem before it is too late.

S.S.

Lily stared down at the parchment for a long moment and allowed the tears to drip and smear the ink. There was no warmth in the letter, hardly a hint of the friendship they once shared. But he did come to her first. He still contacted her and gave her an opportunity to save Lydia. Severus Snape was not known for having mercy, and Lydia often wrote home about how he seemed to hate her more than the rest of his students. Lily knew precisely why that was, and she had urged her daughter to accept his dislike and move on, to study and work hard and remain focused on her studies, no matter how cruel he seemed. The only way to deal with Severus was to play his own game, to never take the bait and to rise above the challenges. But if he was writing to her now, breaking their twelve-year pact never to speak, it must be serious.

"Oh Lydia," she breathed aloud. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

She didn't think her heart could break anymore. It was hard enough facing Harry's rejection, harder still that her husband would not speak to her and would not return home. She knew he wasn't trying to hurt her, knew he was in unfathomable pain and felt terribly lost, but she wanted to help him, wanted to heal him the way he healed her. And now Lydia, too. The whole world was collapsing around her, and she felt like a terrible wife for failing her husband and a terrible mother for failing both of her children.

Inexplicably, she wanted to see Severus. She vowed to hate him until her dying day, but lately, it seemed all bets were off. After all, he hadn't truthfully killed her son, and her family was in enough of a crisis without Lydia getting herself expelled from Hogwarts. If something wasn't done – and soon – she really might lose her entire family. If she had to see Severus Snape to prevent that, perhaps it was worth breaking her promise to herself. Without even thinking, she turned on her heel and Apparated to Hogsmeade.

Professor McGonagall greeted her at the gate, frowning a little in concern at Lily's appearance so soon after the last. "Lily dear, is everything all right?"

"Fine, Professor," she tried to smile, though she knew she was fooling no one, and certainly not her former Head of House. "I'm here to see...to see Remus."

McGonagall frowned a little deeper and nodded, stepping aside to give Lily entrance. "I'm glad you've come," the older woman sighed. "Lydia reminds me very much of both her parents, but I'm afraid she's been a bit more of her father than perhaps anyone would be comfortable with."

"That's what I've heard," she responded wryly. "I'm sorry, but I do promise I'll-"

"I'm quite certain you will do whatever needs to be done," McGonagall cut her off. "Do let me know if you require assistance."

"Thank you," she smiled again, this time a bit more genuinely. She watched McGonagall walk away, then carefully made her way towards the stairwell to the dungeons. The students were all in their Common Rooms now, so she hesitated only a moment outside the door before pushing it open and letting herself in.

"Who's there?" a familiar voice asked sharply. "Students are to be-"

"Severus," she announced herself. "It's me. It's...Lily."

She heard quick footsteps and then found herself facing the pale, shocked visage of Severus Snape. His eyes widened at the sight of her, and she could only stare back.

They stood still, oddly transfixed, former friends turned strangers by betrayal and death and loss.

"Thank you," she finally broke the silence. "For the letter. About Lydia."

He said nothing, and she realised this may have been a terrible mistake. She said horrible things to him twelve years ago, and though she could not bring herself to regret them, she did know how badly she hurt him. It had been her intention, after all, to make him hurt as badly as she hurt, even though she knew, deep down, that he would have done anything to spare her that pain. She could not forgive or understand his choices, could not accept the folly that led him to Voldemort, but she could no longer stand here and call herself blameless. Not with Harry alive and hating her.

"It was decent of you," she managed after a long, hesitation, "to come to me before Dumbledore. What has she done?"

Severus seemed to recover himself after a moment, his face stern and serious.

"She deliberately added ingredients to another student's potions. It caused a minor explosion that she was lucky to have escaped."

"Oh Merlin," she sighed, wanting to break down and weep. Lydia had her father's mischievous ways, but they had always been tempered by her sensibility. She had never in her life been reckless, and for her to be so now... "I'm sorry, Severus. Was anyone hurt?"

"She is fortunate they were not, or even I could not have spared her from a greater punishment."

"And the other times?"

"She has displayed an abysmal attitude and talks back frequently in response to discipline or instruction. My concern is that she has not always been so."

"She's a good girl, Severus," she agreed quietly.

"She is hardly a model student, but previous infractions have never gone further than a tendency to speak too frequently and pay too little attention. She has natural talent but little apparent drive to excel."

Lily couldn't help a short, sad laugh at that. It was true; Lydia was a very clever girl, undoubtedly a product of both her parents' quick minds, but unlike herself, Lydia had little natural ambition, and unlike James, she required study to put that intelligence to use. She was not destined to be a star pupil, but she had never been outright defiant. For her to be misbehaved now was clearly a cry for attention, a sign that her little girl was hurting more than Lily knew, more than she had bothered to inquire.

Without warning, she began to cry. She knew Severus was horrified, but it was too much to handle. How could she have failed Lydia like this? How had she sent her daughter back to school without checking on her, without making absolutely certain she was all right? She promised Lydia they would sort it out, then sent her back to school to manage on her own while Lily mourned and focused on her own pain.

Severus just stood there uncomfortably, and she would have laughed if she could muster anything other than tears. Severus had always been an odd friend, but once, her very best one. He was so unused to normal social interaction, so unaccustomed to every day politeness and conversation, and yet he had cared for her, cared for her so deeply it made her heart ache sometimes. There had always been a goodness in him, a goodness only she had ever been allowed to see, and she always wished she had done more for him,

always wished he could have opened that light for everyone instead of choosing the dark.

But now he was looking at her as he always did, that familiar look of anguish and longing and self-loathing. His loyalty was astounding after all these years without a single word spoken between them, and for a moment, he was just her friend again. The lonely little boy who told her there was nothing wrong with her, her first friend in the magical world, her once ever-present companion until his desperate thirst for attention and approval and her love for his most hated rival drove them apart. She never could have loved him, not the way he wanted her to, but she missed him. She missed him as he had been, missed what he could have been.

"I'm sorry," she wiped at her eyes. "I shouldn't have come like this."

"Has...something happened?" he inquired uncertainly.

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm sorry about Lydia. I'll speak with her and try to...I'll sort it out, Severus, and it won't happen again. Please don't expel her."

"I have no power to expel her. Minerva is her head of house."

"Severus, please," she begged him. "Lydia is a good girl. It isn't her fault."

He regarded her for another moment. "Perhaps you should sit," he suggested wearily.

She nodded mutely and sat down in a chair in his office. He started to make tea, and she simply watched him, focusing on his precision. He was every bit the potions master, and something about it was strangely soothing and familiar.

"I have a son," she suddenly blurted when he handed her a steaming cup. She hadn't planned to tell him this, hadn't planned to tell him any of it, but it felt right now.

She loved Sirius and Remus like brothers, like parts of her very soul,, but they were first, foremost, and forever James's friends. Even if Sirius sided with her, even if he vowed to stand by her in everything, she could not leave James alone without anyone, especially not

Sirius. And Remus was needed, too. James needed his calming presence, his quiet rationality, his sage wisdom and advice. Who was she to turn to when her family all belonged to James?

"You have a son," Severus repeated slowly. "I recall, Lily. He was-

"No, Sev," she shook her head. "Not was. Is. My son is alive."

Severus said nothing. He stared at her without blinking, without moving, as though she'd lost her mind and he was calmly considering what to do about it. He was probably regretting handing her the tea before adding a few potions, and she couldn't blame him.

"I know it's...absurd. Impossible, actually," she acknowledged. "Sirius found him. On Halloween. We've no idea how he escaped that night. Remus and Sirius suspect he accidentally Apparated when the fire started. There was so much raw power that night, it's the only thing that makes sense. We've done all the charms, and it's him, Severus. It's really my son. Harry is alive."

"How have I not heard of this?"

"No one has," she admitted. "Only the four of us. And Lydia."

"Not even Dumbledore?" he raised an eyebrow.

"Harry isn't ready for that," she shook her head. "He only just learned about magic...about us. And he hates us, Severus. My son is alive and wants nothing to do with me." She accepted the tea he offered and cradled it in both hands, bringing it close to her chest for comfort.

"Where is he now?" he questioned after a moment.

"With Sirius. He's the only one Harry trusts. I understand, in a way. He nearly died before Sirius found him. He was sick and freezing, and Sirius brought him home and

warmed him and sat with him until he was well. But he won't even see us, Severus. He blames us for what happened, for never looking for him."

"No one believed he could have survived. Surely he understands that."

"How?" she asked miserably. "He's never had anyone take care of him or love him. Sirius said...he said he was beaten," she managed, the tears beginning all over again. "Beaten and starved and left alone, and suddenly he learns he has parents who have been alive and well and raising another child all this time. Perhaps he's right to hate us. We let him go so easily. We never looked, never tried to find a body. We accepted his death, and all the while, he was suffering. Congratulations, Severus," she said bitterly. "It's not your fault I lost my son. It's mine."

He grimaced as though she'd stuck the knife in his chest all over again. "Lily," he began after a long moment. "I saw what remained of the house. No one would have believed a mere infant could have survived."

"I was his mother!" she cried. "His mother, Severus! What kind of mother doesn't search for her baby? What kind of mother leaves him there to die? My son has been hurt and starving and frightened, and I allowed it to happen!"

"You could have accomplished nothing by searching for him. You would have died as well, and Harry would be forever without a mother."

She had told herself that a thousand times, but it did nothing to ease the guilt. Especially not when Harry still blamed her and refused to see her. Her own baby. Her own precious son. He had no idea how much she loved him and how much she had ached without him. Until he would see her, he never would know the depth of her love or how much she had grieved. Until she could see and speak to him, he would never know that he could spend the rest of his life hating her and she would still love him.

"How did you live with it?" she whispered. "How did you live twelve years with this?"

"I would not wish it on my worst enemy," he answered solemnly. "But you are not at fault, as I was. You have no reason to feel guilty. Your son is a teenager who does not comprehend what happened to

him. He would be a fool not to see, in time, that the fault does not belong to you."

"Don't call my son a fool, Severus," she snapped instinctively.

He did not respond, and she felt so sad and so tired, she wanted to ask him for a Draught of Peace to wipe these worries from her mind. But she knew she couldn't do that. Unlike James, she remembered her obligations, remembered that there was still a little girl who depended on them, a little girl who was as frightened and confused and miserable as they were.

"He won't see Lydia," she finally told him. "She was....devastated. And James left when Lydia was there. She knows he isn't at home. He's been staying at Remus's. I don't think he answers her owls."

"I see," he ground out.

"I know you hate him, Severus, but he's a good man."

"A good man who has abandoned his wife and daughter when it suits him."

"Don't," she pleaded. "Don't do this to me. Don't punish me any longer for choosing him. Don't make this harder for me. I probably shouldn't have even come here."

"Why did you?"

"I...I don't know. I needed a friend."

"We've not been friends in over twelve years. I did as you asked and never contacted you until it was imperative."

"Yes," she nodded, forcing herself not to feel stung. Those were her terms, and she did not regret them. She could not have faced him before now, and she wasn't certain she wanted to be here now. She only knew that she was terrified for Lydia and he was here, the best outlet for her frustration and confusion. But he was not a friend, not anymore. "I'll be going, then. I'll talk to Lydia and make sure that Remus keeps a better eye on her."

"Be sure that you do."

She nodded again and set the tea down on the edge of the desk. She started out of his office, but stopped abruptly before she could cross the threshold. "I said some terrible things to you the last time we saw each other," she admitted quietly.

"Do not apologise. You were well within your rights."

"Maybe," she agreed. "But I hope you know it isn't true. I don't wish you were dead. I don't think I even meant it then. I only wanted you to hurt as much as I did."

She waited a long moment for a respond, and when he didn't answer, she turned and began down the long corridor.

"Lily," he called after her when she reached the staircase. She turned again, waiting for him to come closer.

"What, Severus?" she asked wearily. "What could you have to say?"

"I...regret many things that I have done. But my greatest shame is not what I did to your family. My greatest shame is that it ever came to that. You offered me an alternative, but I turned away from you."

"Severus," she breathed.

"Do not live your life with these regrets. If you turn away from your son because it is what he asks of you, you doom yourself to what I have lived since that day. Your son would be fortunate to know you. He will see that in time."

New tears stung her eyes, and before she could think better of it or give him time to react, she stepped forward and embraced him. "Thank you," she whispered. After an awkward moment, he returned the embrace, and for an instant, they were children again, best friends with a world of opportunity before them.

Severus Snape watched the insufferable stream of first-year brats hurrying into his class room, claiming their usual seats and doing their best to stifle giggles and remains of hallway conversations as they pulled out books and cauldrons. His gaze focused on one particularly annoying miscreant, her dark hair pulled back sharply and revealing a face that was so reminiscent of the two people who

tortured his memories for two decades. James Potter had played his part in making life a veritable hell for a young Severus, while Lily had tortured him with a different sort of treatment. She was kind and gentle and impossibly fun, somehow making him smile when he doubted he even had the requisite muscles to do so. Her cruelty had been a different sort, filling him with a false hope that he deserved more in this life than he had been given, that he would find the love others were so freely given. Lily Evans taught him that some people were good, that there was kindness in the world, that someday perhaps he would have it as well.

And then she fell in love with James Potter. He was a fool to believe it could ever be him, but if it had to be someone else, why couldn't it have been another? Why the boy who had lived to taunt him? She so earnestly believed Potter had changed, that he was no longer the bully he had been in their earlier years, but she never saw that it was a charade for her benefit. James Potter may have stopped hexing him when his back was turned, but he only did it for her benefit. She never saw him for what he was, and Severus had been unwilling to accept that. His stubbornness cost him everything he ever considered dear, and on his darkest nights, he recalled what it cost her as well. His hatred for Potter blinded him, and he in his foolish desperation, he repeated to Voldemort a prophecy that eventually killed Lily's son.

He had been paying the price for twelve years, and the news that he had not killed the child, that the boy still somehow miraculously lived did not ease the guilt he endured since the night he Apparated to Godric's Hollow and found the woman he loved collapsed on the ground in front of the embers of her house. James Potter held her then, held her close and kept her safe as Severus had never done.

He saved her life, but it was too little too late. And she would never know what he did for her. In the end, the sacrifice he thought he was making never even came about; her son had seen to that by somehow defeating the Dark Lord. And so remembering the scene that night at Godric's Hollow was his penance. Remembering Lily's grief, the way she screamed at him and wished him dead, the way her beautiful face contorted with an agony that would kill a lesser woman. Remembering Potter's arms around her, the way she clung to him, the way they instinctively wove their bodies together to anchor them against the pull of defeat and despair. He lost her forever that night, and the fragile forgiveness offered today would

soon flicker and fade. She might not want him dead, she might not hold him responsible any longer, but she would never again turn to him with her secrets or her jokes. She would never again look at him with those lovely eyes filled with delight. There might be civility and understanding, but never again friendship and love.

She absolved him anyway. She washed away the stain of murder on his name. She thanked him and she hugged him. It was more than he could ever ask for, more than he deserved. He could do nothing to restore her son to her, to give back to her the twelve years she ought to have shared with the child she loved more than life, but by some odd twist of fate, her daughter's future landed squarely in his hands.

Lydia Potter was a befuddling amalgamation of Potter and Evans. Her eyes were undoubtedly Lily, and yet the mischief that shone there was sheer Potter. Her knife was quick and steady in preparing potions ingredients – but only on the rare occasion that she was focused on the task at hand. Lily's kindness and sweetness overflowed in the girl, to an almost troubling degree. She was friends with everyone, and it seemed the burden was too much for her to trouble with more trifling matters such as her education. Her father had been one of the fortunate few in this world, a privileged boy who was blessed with raw talent and brains to boot. He could spend his classes consorting with those miserable sidekicks of his and still somehow perform every charm, every transfiguration, and every hex they were taught. Potter rarely cracked a book, and with a smile and a wave of his wand, he wound up top of most classes. Lydia did not inherit such formidable talents, but he saw in her untapped potential.

Unfortunately, this week she tapped into those reserves to wreak havoc and destruction on every classroom she set foot in. It was an infuriating trait to neither ask for help nor control oneself, but for Lily, Severus would force himself to exercise restraint and attempt to put Lydia back on her path. Lily could handle no more at the moment, and Lydia's expulsion might force her over the edge.

"Turn to page 273. I expect each of you to turn in an effective Calming Draught by the end of class today," he instructed. "The first person to create a disruption or cause any sort of mayhem will find themselves scrubbing cauldrons for two weeks. Begin. Miss Potter, come with me."

Lydia looked up in surprise from her book, her jaw clenching tightly. "Sir, the potion will take me all class," she protested.

"It was not a suggestion, Miss Potter," he informed her wryly. She angrily

slammed her book shut and made a noisy show of stomping to the front of the classroom. Any other time, she would have received a deduction of points and detention by now, but he remembered Lily's tears and once more forced restraint upon himself. "My office," he said tersely, leading her into the connecting room and closing the door behind her. He had purposely picked a potion without any dangerous ingredients so he could step out momentarily with only minimal chance of destruction, and he suspected Lydia would put up a fight, no matter how brief her confinement.

"I didn't do anything," she was quick to defend herself.

"I should hope you found no mischief in the thirty seconds you were in my classroom."

"I know you'll give me a zero today. It isn't fair. You can't fail me if it's your fault."

"Do calm yourself, Miss Potter. I don't recall saying anything about failing you."

"But you-"

"I merely wish to speak with you without the obnoxious presence of your classmates. Rest assured whatever you miss will be excused, but if you insist on drawing out our discussion with mindless defenses to imagined accusations, I will take points."

Lydia pouted and looked disturbingly like her mother. Merlin, she was a vexing child. It would be far easier to hate her, but the similarities to Lily made it impossible.

"It has come to my attention," he began after a long moment, "that your poor behaviour this week is related to a great deal of...upheaval in your life of late."

Lydia blinked at him in surprise. "I don't know what you're talking about, Sir. Perhaps if you conversed in English?"

Now it was his turn to be surprised. The cheeky brat was mocking him! He narrowed his eyes at her, not about to be cowed or outdone by an eleven-year old.

"You are fortunate that you are who you are, Miss Potter, or such insolence would already have earned you a week's worth of detention and a severe loss of points for your beloved house."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked defensively.

"Surely you don't believe that Remus Lupin and Sirius Black were your mother's only friends."

Lydia's green eyes widened comically. "You...but she never..."

"Your mother and I had a falling out many years ago, and I do not doubt your mother has remained silent as to our previous friendship. I did feel I owed it to her to speak to her directly about your complete lack of rules and safety in class, and she explained to me your...situation."

"She shouldn't have done that," Lydia shook her head. "It's no one's business."

"Be that as it may, Miss Potter, it is understandable that given the state of things, you find yourself in need of guidance. I understand you are close to Professor Lupin."

"Remus is my godfather."

"And yet you've chosen to act as a foolish child instead of taking your concerns to him?" he challenged.

"I don't have to talk to you."

"That is correct. As an alternative, you may continue to disrupt classes and eventually find yourself expelled."

"You can't expel me!" she argued. "Professor McGonagall said!"

"Your head of house was quite right, but I can report to both her and to the headmaster that you have played dangerous pranks that could injure you or your fellow students. Further misdeeds will not be taken lightly."

Lydia said nothing and stared down at her feet, kicking angrily at some imagined dust on the floor.

"I am not suggesting you confide in me. Or even Remus Lupin. But your malfeasance will not be tolerated at Hogwarts, and you would do well to remember that."

She remained silent, her gaze still fixed on the floor. He waited for some acknowledgment, but Lydia did not see fit to look at him or to speak. He was about to dismiss her to return to class when she finally looked up. "Did my mum really tell you?"

"Yes," he nodded. "She did."

"He doesn't want to see me."

"I gathered you were not the only one he was reluctant to see, Miss Potter."

"But Mum and Dad are brilliant!" she protested. "Maybe not right now, but Uncle Sirius said he didn't have parents at all! Why wouldn't he want a family?"

Severus sighed, wondering just what unfortunate turn of phrase had convinced Lydia that she ought to share her feelings and insecurities with him rather than an adult more suited to these situations. "I think you will find that those most in need of kindness are those most likely to turn it away," he explained, hoping that subtlety was not too much for her. It was easy for him, as a former abused child himself, to understand why Harry Potter would disavow the family he had never known. It likely had little to do with spite or blame, and everything to do with the fear that his deepest suspicions would prove true, that he would be found wanting and once more rejected. Severus had learned, at an early age, never to hold too tightly to the things he wanted most; it only increased the pain when they were taken away.

"I don't understand when you talk like that," Lydia informed him plainly. "Remus does that, too. Why is it always a riddle?"

Too much time around the infuriating Headmaster, Severus thought wryly. "What I mean to say, Miss Potter, is that your brother has been very deeply damaged by things you cannot possibly understand. You have had loving parents all your life. You cannot expect your brother to so easily accept a family he does not know. He likely expects the worst from people."

"That's terrible!" she protested.

"Indeed," he nodded gravely.

"But then how can I fix it?"

"You cannot," he answered simply. "You can only be patient and hope that he will come to trust your family as you do."

"He won't even talk to me," she lamented.

"Do you know no other way to communicate?"

She hesitated for a moment, then smiled for the first time in weeks. In that moment, she looked so like Lily it made his heart ache.

"Detention tonight, Miss Potter."

"But I-"

"Where you will work on your compositions away from the prying eyes of fellow

students."

"Oh. Ohhh."

"If we are in agreement, I shall expect better behaviour from now on."

"Yes, Sir," she nodded obediently.

"You are excused. Complete as much of the potion as you can in the time allotted, and I will grade you solely on what you are able to finish."

"Thank you, Sir," she said earnestly. "And...I'm sorry about what I did."

"I hope so, Miss Potter. See that it does not happen again."

A/N: Thanks for reading and reviewing! The chapter after this one is my favourite, and it will be up in a week or less!

Chapter 17

Harry was sitting at the new desk in his room reading through a spellbook when a sharp rapping at the window startled him from the pages. He jerked upright and glanced out the window to find a tiny brown owl tapping insistently against the glass. For an instant, he felt his stomach churn with nausea and clench a bit with fear as he remembered the last time an owl knocked at his window. That owl got him kicked out of his home and put him back on the streets, where it was cold and damp and he was always hungry.

Taking a deep breath, he did as Claire suggested in these moments and looked around his environment. His own bed, his own books, his own clothes. The colours he and Sirius picked out, the posters on the wall. This was his room, and Sirius had an owl, too, who brought letters without causing any great angst.

His heart settling and his stomach righting itself, Harry got up and opened the window to let the bird in. It chirped cheerfully and held out its leg with a tiny scroll. Confused, he untied it and waited for the bird to fly away. Instead, the little creature seemed to make itself at home, finding a place on his desk to make a little perch. "Weird bird," he muttered as he unrolled the paper.

With a jolt, he realised what it was. His name was at the top, and an all-too-familiar one was jotted at the bottom.

Lydia.

Lydia, his little sister. Lydia, the sister he had never met. He'd been curious about her, more so than James and Lily, and every now and then when Sirius wasn't looking, he'd study the pictures and wonder what she was like. She looked a little like him, he reckoned, with the same dark hair and the same eyes. But she had more freckles than he did, and she was always jumping around and smiling in her pictures.

He stared at the letter for a long moment, not brave enough to read the missive. She was probably angry with him, for making their – well, for making James leave, and he'd sort of disrupted her

peaceful life by barging back in like this. Even though Claire was making him come to terms with the idea that perhaps his parents hadn't truly abandoned him, he was still inexplicably angry with them, but Lydia was different. Sometimes he hated her for growing up safe and happy and loved, but she was the only one who was really innocent in all of this. She wasn't even alive when it happened, and even if he didn't want to be part of her family, he still didn't hate her.

He didn't even realise he wanted Sirius until he was already halfway down the stairs with the letter in hand. He was doing this more and more often, lately, seeking Sirius out when he was feeling upset or anxious. He felt a fierce wave of affection for his godfather, who had made life infinitely better for him and still had more to give.

"There you are," Sirius greeted as Harry met him in the sitting room. "Kreacher made biscuits. I think he may let me have one if I bring you with me."

Any other time, he might have laughed. Instead, he just stood there with the letter, not sure what to say.

"Something wrong?" Sirius frowned.

Harry held out the note to show Sirius. "She wrote me a letter," he blurted.

"Who wrote you a letter?"

"My sis- uh, Lydia," he corrected himself.

"Oh," Sirius nodded uncertainly. "That was...nice of her."

"What should I do with it?"

"Well, I typically find the best thing to do with a letter is read it, but if you'd prefer to plaster your walls with it, I know a few good Sticking Charms."

Harry rolled his eyes and continued to hold the letter up. "I don't have anything to say to her," he told Sirius plainly.

"Then I suppose it's a good thing she did the writing, isn't it?"

Harry just glared back at him, not even the slightest bit amused. "Why does she want to write to me?"

Sirius abandoned the idea of biscuits and sat down on the sofa, inviting Harry to join him. "Listen, Mate," he instructed. "Whether you want a family or not, you have one. Lydia is your sister, and she'll be your sister all your life. You can't fault her for wanting to know her only brother."

"Why would she care? She doesn't know anything about me," he frowned.

"That doesn't mean she doesn't want to."

Harry just stared down at the letter, still not certain he understood why Lydia wanted anything to do with a boy she'd never met. They weren't really siblings, after all. They didn't grow up together, and he made it rather clear he wanted nothing to do with the parents they supposedly shared. She grew up with a family who loved her and cared for her and probably always made sure she had food and clothes and a warm bed at night. What could she possibly want with a boy off the street who was never wanted anywhere he went?

"I see those cauldrons churning," his godfather told him.

"What?"

"What are you thinking about?"

"It doesn't make any sense."

"It doesn't?" Sirius raised an eyebrow. "I think it's perfectly natural that your sister is curious about you and wants to get to know you. You're pretty wonderful, you know."

Harry dropped his gaze back to the letter, uncomfortable with the affection. Sirius said things like that, and he never knew how to react. He wasn't wonderful at all. He was dreadful, really, and he didn't want anyone to know that. Not his mum and dad, not Sirius, not Remus...and not Lydia.

"Ah," Sirius said after a long moment. "Harry," he began, then chewed on his lip and started over. "I had a brother. Two years

younger than me, the same as you and Lydia. His name was Regulus."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked, detecting a note of sadness and the use of the past tense.

"He died in the war, shortly before you were born. He was on the wrong side," Sirius answered darkly. "Our parents...they weren't nice people, Harry. They were vile, actually, and Regulus took after them. In the end, it killed him."

"Oh," he frowned. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Sirius shook his head. "I loved my brother, Harry. As much as I hated him sometimes, he was my little brother and I would have protected him if I could. I am very glad that I knew him, and my only regret is that I didn't try harder to save him."

"Did he hate you also?"

"He pretended to," he nodded. "We didn't get on, Harry. Not for a very long time. But when I ran away from home and went to your d...when I went to the Potter's," he caught himself, "Regulus asked me to come home."

"Why did he do that, if you fought all the time?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Because we were brothers, Mate," he said meaningfully. "You could be a dead awful brother, and Lydia...she would still want to know you." Sirius stood after that and walked over to his side, ruffling his hair as he so often did. "I know the family thing is new, Harry. It only gets better with practise."

Harry sat for an hour on the sofa, unfolding and then refolding the piece of parchment in his hands, debating whether or not he wanted to read it. On the one hand, it couldn't hurt anything to read it. He could toss it in the rubbish bin after, and no one would have to know he read it. On the other, he still wasn't certain he wanted anything to do with the people Sirius called his family. Reading the letter was one step closer to acknowledging it, and even if he thought he might forgive them in time, he wasn't ready. Not yet. The wounds were still

too fresh, the abandonment still too real. He was still jealous of Lydia that she had everything he ever wanted.

But what Sirius said kept echoing in his head. Lydia wanted to know him because he was her brother. He'd never been anyone's brother before, or anyone's friend, really. Maybe it would be nice to have someone who liked him, just for being him. Sort of like Sirius seemed to. Sirius really didn't have to care for him, but he was always making sure he ate enough, always checking on him at night, always talking to him as though it really mattered what he said. It was nice, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have someone else who felt the same way.

Finally decided, he unrolled the parchment and started to read.

Dear Harry,

I know that Uncle Sirius probably told you that you have a sister, but since we don't know each other, I wanted to write to you. My name is Lydia Lucille Potter, but a lot of people call me Lulu. Dad started that because he called me Lyddie Lu. My friends mostly call me Lydia, but since you're my brother, maybe you'd like to call me Lulu.

I turned eleven in April and started my first year at Hogwarts in September. Hogwarts is really brilliant and a lot of fun. My best friends here are Briallen, Annie, and Lucy. Briallen has been my best friend since we could talk, but she's in Hufflepuff now, so I don't see her as much. I'm in Gryffindor, just like Mum and Dad both were! I have some other friends in Gryffindor, like Ginny, who is a year older than me, and Hermione, who is the same age as you. Hermione is the smartest person I've ever known, except for maybe Mum and Dad. And Remus and Uncle Sirius, too. But Hermione is very clever!

I don't really know what to write, seeing as we've never met before. But I thought that maybe you should know that I thought about you a lot. I used to make up things that we would have done together. Maybe someday you will want to do those things with me, or new things. I bet it would be loads better than it was when I made it up! I know that you don't want to see me right now, and that's all right. I think maybe I understand, even though I really want to talk to you.

Just in case you do decide that you want to meet me sometime, I'll tell you a little more about me. I like Transfiguration class the most, because it is very useful and fun. I'm pants at Potions, but I think maybe I'm going to try to do better. My favourite thing to do is fly. I got my first broom when I was four, and next year I want to try out for Quidditch. My friend Ginny is a reserve player and she's brilliant! I also like Herbology a lot. We get to plant flowers and things and learn about herbs and how they are useful. This year on Halloween, I planted a flower for you. Hermione taught me the charms so it will grow inside. It's a red anemone, because it means remembrance. I hope it's pretty for you when it grows, but I'm happy that you're here now and that Uncle Sirius is taking care of you.

I hope that you'll write me back. I know you've never had a sister, but I've never had a brother, so maybe we can figure it out together. You can use my owl, Artemis. She knows how to carry mail with her and bring it to me at school. She'll stay until you tell her to go away. I won't be mad if you decide not to write me, but I hope you will.

Your little sister,

Lydia Potter

Harry felt unexpectedly warm and loved when he finished the letter. For all his determination to hate these people, Lydia seemed fun and happy, and she really wanted to talk to him. She actually wanted to talk to him. The part about the flower...he never realised that someone might feel that way about him, that they could really miss him without even knowing him. But Lydia had no reason to lie to him. Lydia had done nothing wrong, so she had no reason to feel guilty. But she still thought about him. It was odd and perplexing...but maybe he sort of liked it.

He read the letter again. Then a third time. And by the fourth time, he decided he would write her back. Carefully placing it on the coffee table, he made for the kitchen and found Sirius nursing a cup of tea and eating from a plate of biscuits.

"How do owls carry mail?" he inquired. It wasn't what he really meant to ask, but it came out before he could stop it.

Sirius blinked a few times and set his tea aside. "Owls have a special kind of magic. Wizards and witches can train them to carry

letters, but their magic helps them find whoever they carry post for," he explained.

"So can any owl do it?"

"I don't know," Sirius admitted. "I think only some owls are smart enough, or have the right magic."

"And they can find anyone?"

"I've never seen one that couldn't."

"That's pretty wicked."

"Magic is wicked, mate," Sirius agreed with a grin.

Harry considered for a long moment, trying to draw the courage to say what he wanted to say. "I think I'd like to write to Lydia."

"All right," Sirius agreed evenly.

"She wrote to me on some sort of strange paper."

"That's parchment. Lydia will have written with a quill. It takes some getting used to if you've never done it. I can find you some paper and a muggle biro, if you'd like."

Harry nodded, not wanting to make a fool of himself trying to use a quill and parchment. Lydia probably wouldn't mind if he did it the muggle way, he decided.

Sirius stepped out for a few minutes, then returned with paper and a pen. He handed both to Harry but didn't move from his spot, obviously sensing that Harry wasn't quite ready to be on his own yet. "Sickle for your thoughts?" his godfather asked after a long moment.

"You say weird things," Harry frowned.

"Wizard stuff. You'll learn soon. Want to tell me what you're thinking?"

Harry frowned and stared down at the paper, intimidated by the size of it. Suddenly, he felt nervous for a whole new reason. Lydia had

obviously been in school her whole life, and her writing was tiny and neat. School was an occasional luxury for him, even when he was with the foster families. None of them ever seemed too fussed about him making it to school, and once he was on his own, attending school was too dangerous. He learned to read and write a long time ago, but his writing was not very practised.

Hot shame bubbled through his veins, and in an unwonted burst of anger and frustration, he crumpled up the paper and threw it across the room. Sirius lifted his eyebrows in surprise and slowly lowered himself into a chair next to Harry. "What's wrong, Love?" his godfather asked gently.

"I'm stupid," he mumbled, fighting back tears.

"What?" Sirius asked incredulously. "Nonsense. You're very bright, Harry. Look how quickly you've picked up spells. You'll be on level with your year in no time."

Harry shook his head, too embarrassed to admit that he was no good at writing. He knew how, but it wasn't something he'd done much, and he knew his letters would be shaky and awkward, nothing like Lydia's nice print. Tears filled his eyes, but before he would let them fall, he bolted out of his chair and ran to his room.

That was where Sirius found him half an hour later. Harry was lying in his bed, staring miserably at the ceiling when his godfather knocked. "Can I come in?" he asked.

Harry just shrugged, but Sirius took it as an invitation. He cautiously walked towards the bed and sat down on the edge of it. He was quiet for a moment, but that suited Harry just fine. He didn't want to talk, not about this. Sirius was awfully good at joking him out of a bad mood, but nothing could fix this. For an instant, he let himself dream about a better life where he had a sister who cared about him, who might be his friend someday. But it was a pointless, silly dream. How could she when she found out how messed up he really was? Sirius kept talking about getting him caught up to his year at Hogwarts, but even if he could do magic, how would he make up for all the years of school he missed? His sister would find out he was stupid and slow, just like everyone always said he was, and then she wouldn't want anything to do with him.

Just a freak, he reminded himself bitterly. It was nice living with Sirius, better than things had ever been before, so why had he let himself think of anything more? This was more than he ever thought possible, and undoubtedly more than he deserved.

"Is there any sense in trying to convince you that Lydia won't care about anything so long as she gets a letter from you?" Sirius finally asked.

Harry didn't answer, still staring up at the ceiling.

"I know you're a quick reader. You devour all those books without a problem. You aren't stupid," his godfather attempted to comfort. "Did anyone ever teach you to write?"

"Yes, but it was a long time ago," he admitted. "I...I haven't done it much."

"Loads of people have sloppy writing."

"It'll look like a baby did it."

"Very talented baby who can write a letter."

"I'm not writing her," he said stubbornly. "She won't like me when she finds out."

"That's rubbish, Harry. Lydia has spent all her life wondering about her brother. She isn't going to stop wondering just because your handwriting needs a bit of work."

"She'll know that I'm stupid."

"You are not stupid," Sirius countered firmly. "It isn't your fault those awful muggles kept you from school. You are very bright, Harry, and very talented. With a bit of practise, you'll be all caught up."

"I won't," he shook his head, angered as tears pricked at his eyes once more.

"I'm just stupid, and worthless, and-"

"Stop that," Sirius demanded harshly. "I don't want to hear you speak like that again."

More tears came at the anger in his godfather's voice, and he promptly flipped over to hide his head and escape the blows to come. Instead, there was just a long, heavy sigh, and then a gentle hand on his back that caused him to flinch. Sirius quickly pulled his hand away, then moved it to ruffle Harry's hair. For some reason, that didn't bother him as much as being touched anywhere else, and he allowed the contact as he remembered that Sirius would never hurt him.

"I'm sorry," his godfather apologised. "I shouldn't be angry. I'm not angry with you. I'm angry that anyone ever made you feel that way, and that you believe it."

"I can't even write," he sniffled, coming undone a little at the tenderness in Sirius's voice. "It won't look like it's supposed to."

"Perhaps, but that isn't your fault, Harry, and we'll work on it, all right?"

Harry nodded automatically, but he wasn't so sure it would help.

"Lydia will be thrilled to hear from you, no matter what your writing looks like. But if you would feel better, I know something we could do."

"What?"

"There are all sorts of reasons that wizards and witches might not be so good at writing. I'll send out for a Dictaquill. You can tell it what you want it to write, and it'll do the work for you. How does that sound?"

"It will write what I tell it to?" he asked curiously.

"Yes," Sirius nodded. "I can even set a Silencing Charm on the room so you can have a bit of privacy. The letter will be just between you and Lydia, and the handwriting will be just fine. How does that sound?"

It sounded wonderful, actually, but he hated for Sirius to go to the trouble of procuring the item just so he didn't have to humiliate himself. "Is it expensive?" he asked quietly.

"Not a bit, and I wouldn't be worried even if it was. Now, go downstairs and have a biscuit and some tea. I'll send Kreacher out, yeah?"

"All right," he agreed nervously.

"No more of the 'S' word, please," Sirius added.

Harry nodded and sat upright as Sirius ruffled his hair again. This time, Harry felt a rush of affection and gratitude and dared to take a chance. He impulsively looped his arms around his godfather's neck, drawing in for a hug. Sirius gladly accepted, pulling him close and rubbing his back.

"Let's make that two biscuits," Sirius suggested as he released him.

Harry just grinned and hurried downstairs to the kitchen. He was still nibbling on his snack when Kreacher returned with the purchase, and Sirius explained how it work and set a charm so Harry could work in privacy in his room.

Even with all that accomplished, however, Harry found he wasn't quite sure what to say. Lydia's letter had been chatty and excited, but he didn't have so much to talk about. He didn't really want to tell her about Claire, or how he was studying and working with Sirius so he might eventually catch up to other wizards his age. He still wasn't ready to meet her, and he didn't want to talk about their parents. So what did he say to the sister he had never met? How could he even begin such a conversation? Where did he even begin?

Severus was reading the most incoherent, nonsensical stack of essays written by his third years, a headache quickly forming near his temples. Why did the blasted children learn nothing? Did they really think so little of reading a textbook every now and then? He glared at the miserable spelling of one particular dunderhead and angrily crossed it out with his quill. Apparently they couldn't be bothered with a dictionary, either, or even one of those cheating quills that corrected spelling. He'd almost rather them be lazy than torture him with their ignorance.

He marked the essay with a 'T' out of spite and flipped to the next. As he began to read, he heard the thundering of young feet headed down the dungeon steps. "Professor Snape!" a voice called as a fist knocked rapidly on his door.

He knew that voice, and he felt his headache worsen. "Enter," he responded reluctantly.

The door flew open, and the excited face of Lydia Potter was there to greet him. "Professor Snape!" she cried, waving a bit of parchment in front of him. "He wrote me back!"

"The door, Miss Potter."

"What?"

"I was under the impression this was a secret," he raised an eyebrow. "Your little friends can surely hear you all the way in Gryffindor Tower, the way you're carrying on."

Lydia huffed in frustration but closed the door behind her, then boldly stepped forward and set the parchment on his desk. The girl had Gryffindor nerve, that was certain, as well as a complete lack of respect she undoubtedly learned from her brute of a father. "He wrote me back, Professor Snape," she explained.

"I see that."

"He didn't say much," she frowned. "He thinks he'll be a bad brother."

Severus had absolutely no interest in the ditherings of Harry Potter, but apparently Lydia had failed to understand that their discussion was a favour to Lily and nothing more. She had, somehow, gotten the impression that he wished her to confide in him. "Quite possible," he responded wryly.

To his surprise, Lydia looked stricken by that. He felt a flicker of regret, then scowled deeper at his own reaction. What did he care if his barbs hurt the insufferable child?

"He won't be," she shook her head defiantly. "He couldn't."

"You have never met him."

"That doesn't matter. He's my brother, isn't he? He'll be brilliant. I know he will."

Severus looked pointedly to his stack of essays and hoped against hope that Lydia would pick up on his irritation with her presence and take her blatherings to someone more appropriate...Remus Lupin, for instance. The werewolf had already garnered the effusive praise of their colleagues and was being lauded for his natural talent with children. Surely he would be the better choice for this.

Lydia seemed to have no such compunctions. "Could you help me write him back?" she asked eagerly.

"Help you?" he asked incredulously. "Despite the mess you have made on your essays thus far, I believe you have learned to properly use a quill."

Lydia looked stung for another moment, then shook it off. "Not writing it, Sir," she huffed. "But you...it's just that you knew about him the last time! You told me that he wouldn't understand, and you explained that he probably wouldn't trust anyone, and that he might be afraid. And that really helped me write to him! I thought you could do it again, since you understand and all! I really don't want to say the wrong thing, you see, because then he might-"

"Miss Potter," he cut her off, calling a halt to her rambling monologue. She abruptly stopped speaking and looked up at him, her green eyes full of hope. He had every intention of ordering her back to her dormitory, but that look...Merlin, the manipulative little imp knew how to get her way. No child appealed to his sympathies this way, but she was so very Lily that it was nearly impossible to crush her the way he normally would. "Be seated," he commanded, waving towards the chair across from his desk.

Lydia immediately sat and scrambled through her bag to pull out a quill and parchment. Since she had placed the parchment on his desk, he took it as an open invitation to read the missive from her brother.

Lydia,

Thank you for the letter. I'm sorry that I said I didn't want to see you. I still don't think I'm ready, but maybe if you would keep writing, sometime we can meet each other. I think I would probably be rubbish as a brother, so maybe you're better off without any siblings. Your friends sound very nice. I asked Sirius about your owl and he explained how it carries post. I'm just learning about magic and it all seems very strange, but your owl is pretty. I hope you are doing all right and aren't too mad at me.

Harry

Well. Interesting, he thought as he read the letter a second time. Whatever he had expected of Harry Potter, this was not it. Lydia had so much of Potter in her, he automatically expected those same arrogant qualities in the boy. Despite his previous insight into the boy's reluctance to speak with his true family, he had not expected such clear hallmarks of long-term abuse and neglect. For one thing, the boy placed no value in himself and expected his sister to brush him aside. For another, he was genuinely concerned that she might be angry with him. For what? For not being dead? For daring to shirk her presence when he had spent twelve years without a family? Obviously, Lily's son was deeply troubled. This was not a happy, spoiled child, and Severus found it far too close for comfort.

Shaking bleak thoughts and dark memories from his mind, he once more shifted his gaze to Lydia. She was very earnestly staring down at her parchment, as though she could will the right words to appear. If only she would devote the same amount of attention to her coursework, perhaps she wouldn't be driving half the professors mad, including – and especially - himself.

"Miss Potter," he addressed her. Her head instantly snapped up, her wide, trusting eyes meeting his. It was strange, really, that she would trust him so easily. He had given her no reason to do so, except for a few words of guidance and advice, and reluctant ones at that. But Lydia Potter also had no reason to distrust adults, who had likely loved and spoiled her all her life. Even the professors who grumbled incessantly about her frequent chatter had a bit of a spark in their eyes as they spoke about her. The infuriating creature certainly did have a way of weaseling in where she was most unwanted.

"Yes, Sir?" she asked eagerly.

"What would you like most to say to your brother?" he inquired.

"Oh," she frowned. "Well, my dad always said that Harry loved them and that he would have loved me. And I guess...well, it isn't really true, is it? But only because he didn't know about us. It would be different if he was really...well, Daddy said that he knew about me, in Heaven."

"The point, Miss Potter," he ordered impatiently.

"I guess I want to tell him that he shouldn't be so silly. He's my brother and I love him. I don't care about anything else," she said simply.

Severus frowned a little and thought painfully on his own childhood. Lily had

been his saving grace then, the beautiful little girl who offered him goodness and light in the midst of cruelty and darkness. But unlike Lydia, Lily had an instinct about her, a way of understanding others when they did not understand themselves. Later, much later, she would be more plain and frank about their friendship, reminding him that they were friends and she would always care for him. In the beginning, though, her words were more reserved. She never wavered, but it was as though she sensed that he would not – could not – accept such generosity. She was intuitive, even as a young child, and Lydia was frank, blunt, and to the point. Perhaps those could be admirable qualities, but a troubled child like Harry would undoubtedly crumble under such open affection.

"Such words may confuse your brother," he told her. "He has no reason to trust such bold sentiments."

"But it's true!" she protested.

"Perhaps," he agreed mildly. "But it might be better to merely open the lines of communication at this point in time. You could, for example, suggest that you continue to write one another and assure him that you will not mind if he is less than...what you might expect of your flesh and blood."

Lydia considered this for a moment, then nodded. "If I promise to sit and write really quietly, will you maybe read it and tell me if it's all right?" she asked hopefully, nearly bouncing up and down in her excitement.

Leave it to you, Lily, to find a way to torture me without even being present, he thought wryly as Lydia continued to ooze hopeful energy. "Not a word," he warned her.

"Thank you!" she cried happily. "I promise I won't say anything!" she vowed.

"Not off to a good start, are you?"

"You're funny, Professor Snape. I can see why you and my mum were friends," she grinned, then turned her attention to her parchment.

His stomach made a funny turn, and he scowled at what must be indigestion. Merlin save me, he frowned, then turned his focus back to the miserable essays and tried to ignore the frantic scratching of Lydia's quill.

A/N: Thank you, thank you, thank you to all my readers and reviewers :)

Chapter 18

Lily thought for several days about what Severus said. She was still angry with herself for going to him, humiliated that she'd been so desperate for a friend. Severus Snape betrayed her in the worst possible way, and though she would have forgiven him for very nearly anything, he had gone too far when his actions destroyed her family.

He had a point, though. For weeks, she had been dwelling in her misery and waiting for her son to change his mind. Her scared, vulnerable, teenage son. Her son, who had been so badly hurt and had never known the love of a parent. Of course he didn't understand. Of course he didn't want to see her. It was her job to explain this to him, to make sure he understood how very much he was loved. Sirius may have promised not to force Harry into interactions with his parents, but Sirius had a unique role in Harry's life. Sirius had won his trust and his devotion, and it was far too fragile to betray. Once she moved past the initial hurt, she knew Sirius was doing the right thing by her son.

But that didn't mean she had to play by the same rules. As long as Sirius wasn't the bad guy, who was to stop her from speaking to Harry? How could he ever know how precious he was if she didn't fight for him? She vowed to make him understand, and then she left him, she stayed away. She should be there, every day, begging to speak to him, begging to be a part of his life. He needed to see that, to know that she would never give up, no matter how many times he denied her. It might tear her soul apart each and every time, but she would do it for him. She would do anything to show him how very vital he was, how very lost she had been without him.

It was long past dinner time, but she was far too anxious to eat. Determination building, she vanished her dinner and hurried upstairs to retrieve her cloak. When she returned downstairs, she heard the familiar rush of the fireplace and glanced over just in time to see Sirius's face appear. "Lil, you there?" he called.

"Sirius! I was about to call you," she greeted, kneeling down in front of the fire.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes, I just...well, I'll explain in a moment. Did you need something?"

"No, not really. I just thought I ought to tell you how wonderful your daughter is."

"Lydia?" she asked in surprise. "Last I heard, she was wreaking havoc at Hogwarts."

Sirius chuckled a little at that. "Yes, well, perhaps the mischief-making did her well. Did you know she's been writing Harry?"

"What? She's been writing him?"

"Yes. The owls have been back and forth for days now."

Lily felt her heart swell with love for her daughter and gratitude for Severus. She knew, without doubt, that he had something to do with it. Lydia had been sullen and depressed when Lily talked to her about her behaviour, but she hadn't had an owl now in days, and Lydia was suddenly writing to Harry. "That's...wonderful," she breathed. "Harry doesn't mind?"

"I think it unnerved him a bit at first, to be honest," Sirius admitted. "But he's very curious about her. I think it's good, Lily. And she's been remarkable. Harry lets me read it so I can help him with what to say. It makes him a bit nervous to write. But Lydia is writing him volumes about Hogwarts and her classes. She's even thrown in a bit about you and James."

"That doesn't bother him?" she asked in surprise.

"If it does, he hasn't shown it. He lights up when Artemis arrives."

That was the final push Lily needed to convince her she was doing the right thing. "I'm going to come through, Sirius," she announced. "I've decided something. That's why I was going to call. I want to see him."

"Lily, I promised him that-"

"Yes, I know you did, but I didn't make any promises," she cut him off. "And I need him to know that I won't give up on him, Sirius. I've gone about this all wrong. I need him to know that I will fight for him every single day."

Sirius wisely chose not to argue. It would have been a losing battle, but she was glad he had the good sense not to even attempt it. She was ready to see her son, right now, and she was glad not to waste her time making that clear to Sirius. "All right," he agreed. "Come on through."

Lily stirred up all her courage and tossed the powder into the fireplace. Seconds later, she tumbled out at Grimmauld Place and brushed the soot off her cloak. Sirius gave her a quick peck on the cheek, then gestured up the stairs.

"He's in his room," he explained. "I suppose you should just surprise him. If he has time to think, he'll work himself up into a state."

"Is he doing all right?" she asked worriedly.

"He has good days and bad days. We're working on his magic, and that helps."

"Sirius, he can't! He can't do magic outside of school!"

"Oh Lily. Once a Head Girl, always a Head Girl. I thought James had cured you of that by now," he teased.

"He could get in trouble," she frowned, not the least bit amused that Sirius was helping her son break the law. That was hardly how she wanted his existence found out. The Ministry would probably bend over backwards to accommodate Harry Potter, but he certainly didn't need the trauma of legal troubles.

"Lily, I did magic here from the moment I could talk," Sirius countered. "This place is nearly as secure as Gringotts. Come to think of it, if I got myself a dragon, I could maybe compete with them."

She fixed him with a stare, the one that had always worked in their school days. Sirius Black was cowed by very few people, but she

was one of the lucky ones. He had never been able to stand up to her. "Just because it can't be detected doesn't make it right."

"Perhaps," he shrugged. "But it helps him, and he'll need to be taught the basics if he ever wants to attend school."

He did have a point, but she didn't have to like it. "You do not want to experience my wrath if you get my son into even a speck of trouble."

Sirius mock saluted. "Yes Ma'am," he responded cheekily. "Now go on."

She started towards the stairs, then hesitated as she grasped what was about to happen. This was only the second time she would see her son as a teenager, and the thought still made her lightheaded. "Sirius," she whispered.

"You'll be all right," he promised. "He's a Potter. He can only resist you for so long."

She laughed softly, then allowed a quick hug before taking a deep breath and summoning her strength. Her heart pounded in her ears as she climbed the stairs, and she felt a little dizzy as she walked down the long hallway. All the rooms were open, except one, but the door was slightly ajar and warm light spilled out of it. You can do this, she told herself. This is your son. This is the baby you gave birth to, the baby you held in your arms and rocked to sleep every night. You can do this.

One step, then another, and then another. She thought perhaps she should knock, but if she announced her presence, he might not let her in. She stood for a full minute at the doorway, debating whether she should just walk in.

A quiet cough came from inside, and it jolted her out of inaction. She made sure she wasn't visible by the door, then knocked once. "Come in," her son's voice called.

Here goes nothing, she thought, stepping into the bedroom to find Harry seated at the desk, bent over a piece of parchment. He didn't look up as she entered, obviously expecting his godfather.

"Lydia wrote me again," he announced. "Can you-"

Harry started to turn, then stopped abruptly when he realised it was not Sirius in his room.

"Hi, Harry," she murmured as his face paled and his eyes grew wide behind his glasses. He looked even more like James than she remembered, his hair a bit messy and his cheeks more filled out than they had been before. He was still small, but he looked so very much like his dad, and for an instant, she ached for her husband. He ought to be here with her, standing at her side as they fought for their boy. Harry deserved to know how much both of his parents loved him, but for now, one would have to do.

"W-what are you doing here?" Harry stammered nervously, already shrinking back towards her desk. She felt her heart beginning to break all over again, and she fought the urge to rush to his side and wrap him up in her arms. She wanted so badly to cling fast to him and never let go, but she could practically feel his fear from here. A wrong move could frighten him away forever, and she was already risking so much by coming to him like this.

"Sirius kept his word," she began carefully. "This wasn't his idea. I just...I really needed to see you, Harry, so I came anyway."

His eyes darted all around the room as though he was seeking an escape. He looked anywhere and everywhere...except at her. Even from this distance, she could see him trembling. What did they do to my boy? she wondered miserably. He had once been such a happy, loving child, always ready for cuddling with Mum, or playing with Dad, or laughing with Sirius. He never shied away from affection as a baby, and now someone had broken him, turned him into this terrified ghost of a child. She still remembered how those chubby baby arms used to reach for her, and it was such a perversion of that love for him now to be so frightened.

But she would fix it. She would not rest until he trusted and loved and laughed again. He deserved that. He deserved so much more than that.

"I know you don't want to see me, and I understand. I do," she started again. "But I need you to know something, Harry, and then if you want me to go, I'll go. You don't ever have to see me again, if

that's what you want," she told him plainly, willing herself to be brave, willing herself to look at those eyes, a reflection of her own, and tell him everything he needed to hear. Where did she even begin? How could she possibly explain a mother's love to a child who had been hurt and abused by every adult in his life? How could he understand how truly limitless it was when nothing had ever been freely given to him?

"I know that everything has been so hard for you," she murmured. "And I hate that, Harry. I wish so badly that I could go back to that night and change everything. I would have done anything in the world to spare you. Someday I hope you'll believe me. Losing you...it was the worst thing that ever happened to me. Some days I didn't know if I could survive, if I could even breathe without you. But no matter what else you believe, Harry, please, please believe me when I say I truly thought you died that night. Nothing else ever would have stopped me from going after you."

Harry still remained silent and refused to look at her. His eyes were fixed at some unseen mark on the carpet, and he did not move a muscle in his chair. The despair rose inside, beginning to choke her throat. Perhaps this was hopeless, perhaps he would never trust her. She couldn't blame him, not after all he endured, but she could not imagine her life without him. She could not imagine knowing he was alive but never being a part of his life. She had so many dreams for him once, so many plans. He was supposed to go off to Hogwarts, make mischief and impress professors, play Quidditch and make her crazy with fear, fall in love and break her heart when he left her. He was supposed to have a full, happy life that he always shared with his mum. He was supposed to come to her advice and unconditional love, but now she had to face the reality that he might never want her to play that role, that he might grow up and live a life without her, that he might even be happy without her in his life.

"I love you, Harry," she whispered as the tears filled her eyes. "So very much. You can't comprehend how...I was in love with you before I laid eyes on you. And then when I held you for the first time...it was forever, Harry. It is forever. I love you," she vowed tenderly even as the tears filled her eyes.

Harry looked up now, bravely meeting her gaze. Her little boy looked so overwhelmed and confused, half-defensive, half-vulnerable and terrified and desperate, but he was looking at her. Slowly, the

despair receded, and hope surged once more. There was still a chance. She could still reach him.

"I love you," she repeated fiercely. "A piece of my heart has been missing since the moment I lost you. There has never been a day that I haven't missed you and ached for you. If I had any idea there was even a chance you were still alive, I would have gone to the ends of the earth to find you. I never would have given up until you were home and safe in my arms. You can hate me, Harry. You can hate me every day for the rest of your life, but I will never give up on you," she swore. "I will wait for you...always. If you ever decide you want me to be a part of your life, in any way, I'll be here. And until then, I will just keep loving you. I will just hoping that someday you'll let me show you. I will fight for you every day of my life."

Harry stared at her, frozen in his place, barely even breathing as he searched her face with those eyes that were far too solemn for any thirteen-year old boy. James, at that age, had been an unstoppable force of reckless energy and abandon, impervious to threats, indestructible. Their son was fragile and frightened, his face haunted, but his indomitable spirit still radiated from his proud expression and his ability to stand here today after all he had suffered.

Harry had not grown up with them. He had not had his father to guide him or his mother to advise him. He had not heard stories about Godric Gryffindor or the long line of Potters before him, but somehow, he had become a boy of incredible courage all on his own. He had faced down danger and solitude and survived. He had fought to endure, sometimes just barely making it, but still here with her today.

"You don't have to say anything," she assured him as his silence continued. "I can go now, if you'd like. But I do hope you'll let me come back. I just want the chance to talk to you and see you sometimes."

He hesitated for a moment, then slowly nodded. It wasn't quite the victory she was hoping for, but it was enough for now. It was a start. At least he would allow her in the same room, and perhaps, given enough time, he would slowly begin to accept her presence in his life. Maybe he didn't want a mum, maybe that ship had long since sailed. She would never be all right with anything less, but she

would take what was offered and learn to live with it if it meant having her son in her life.

"All right," she smiled softly. "Thank you for letting me talk to you, Harry. I'll let you get some rest now."

It was physically painful to walk away from him, but she focused on her feet moving towards the door and tried to remember that hope was not lost yet. He had already given her more than she had just moments ago, and for now, it was all she could ask for.

Just as she reached the hallway, his quiet voice called her back. "You..." he managed, then cleared his throat and tried again. "You don't even know me."

"Oh Harry," she breathed.

She wanted to laugh, but he wouldn't understand. How could he? How could he possibly understand how utterly meaningless that was to a mother who had loved him when he was nothing more than an idea in her own head? He had never known that kind of love, because of Peter, because of Voldemort, because of cruel fate and circumstance.

She turned to face him again and took a step back into the room.

"I know," she whispered, "that when you were a baby, you loved your toy broom almost more than you loved your mummy and daddy. The only time you cried was when we took it away from you. I know that you were my little love, but you were daddy's boy. Your eyes followed him wherever he went. I know that no one made you laugh like Sirius. I know that your laugh made me forget everything wrong in the world. I don't know your favourite colour, or what you like to eat, but I know who you are. You're my son," she said meaningfully. "I know that I loved you before you were born and I continued to love you long after I believed you were gone. And I know that no matter what you decide, I will never stop thanking the stars that you're still here and that there's still some small chance I will get to know you again."

Harry stared at her but did not speak. The silence dragged on, stretching interminably between them, taking her farther and farther away from him with every moment that passed. And then suddenly,

the green eyes staring back at her filled with tears. "I...I know it isn't your fault," he said tremulously. "I don't know why I said that. I don't know...I don't know why I feel so angry."

"Oh Harry," she sighed again, her arms aching to hold him. "You've every right to feel angry. You were taken from us, Love. You never should have been alone."

"But...it wasn't your fault," he choked. "You didn't know."

"No," she agreed softly. "I didn't. But so much has happened to you, Harry. All at once. You can feel whatever you need to feel. It doesn't have to make sense. Just as long as you know that we care about how you feel and want to help you. All of us."

"What about my d...what about James? I know that he...I know he left. Because of me."

"Oh Harry," she shook her head. "It wasn't because of you. Your father loves

you, just like I do. He loves you so much that he can't bear what happened to you. He believes it's all his fault, but he'll see reason, Darling," she promised. "He'll never be able to stay away from you. He's frightened right now, and hurt, but not because of you. Never because of you."

"He said I should stay with Sirius," he protested quietly. "I heard him. He came and told Sirius that I should stay here. He doesn't want me back."

"No," she shook her head quickly. "No, Harry, that isn't it at all. Please don't think that. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your dad only said that because he's worried about you. We both know that you feel safe here, and that you've been upset with us. If you want to stay here...if it makes you feel better, we would never force you to leave, no matter how much we want you home with us."

"I...I don't know," Harry shook his head, his voice so scared and uncertain it broke her heart. She wanted him home with her so badly, but the fear made her desperate to reassure him, to promise him he could stay here every day for the rest of his life and she would still love him. "What if he never comes back?" Harry asked.

"He'll come home, Love. I know your father, and he'll be home. But that isn't for you to worry about. You don't have to do anything, or make any decisions. We understand. We just want you where you feel safe and happy. You can stay with Sirius as long as you'd like."

"Will you...will you maybe come and talk to me?" he asked nervously. "Even if I stay?"

"Nothing could keep me away," she answered as new tears filled her eyes. "I will be here as much as you'll let me."

"O-okay," he managed. "I think...I think I'd like that."

Joy beyond her wildest imagination flooded her heart. Not so very long ago, the closest she could get to Harry was an empty grave in Godric's Hollow. She never dreamed she could have him back, and no matter what she had hoped for today, she hadn't expected him to let her in. She hadn't expected him to be so wonderful, but perhaps she should have known.

The ache to hold him grew, but she knew she couldn't take him by surprise. "May I hug you, Harry?" she asked him quietly.

He sucked in a deep breath but nodded. He rose cautiously, his body stiff as a board as she moved towards him. She slowly closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around him and kissing the top of his head. Her eyes shut as she breathed him in, feeling the solid warmth of him in her arms for the first time in twelve terrible years. It all seemed a bad dream now, and she felt her heart knitting back together as the missing piece of her family was finally restored. He had grown up just as she hoped and dreamed, and yet the reality was far better than anything she ever imagined. He was smaller than he ought to be, bones protruding where they shouldn't, but he was home now, and they would take care of that.

After a moment, however, she noticed that he was shaking. "Harry, are you all right?" she asked worriedly.

He started, then suddenly backed out of her arms. "I'm sorry!" he cried. "I'm sorry!"

"Shh, no, it's all right," she rushed to assure him, not even sure what he was apologising for. "It's a lot to take in, isn't it?" she asked knowingly. He nodded, and encouraged, she sat down on his bed and patted the place next to her, inviting him to join her. He did, but kept sufficient space between them. That was all right; she could work with it. "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to come and tell you all of this. I haven't known what to do," she admitted. "I just wanted to do the right thing for you."

"I told you not to," he shrugged. "It's my fault."

"None of this is your fault, Harry. But it doesn't matter now. Let's not worry about any of that. I'm here, and we're going to make everything right again. I promise." She reached and out lightly cupped his cheek, removing it again when he flinched just slightly at her touch. It stung, but she knew he wasn't used to the attention of a mother.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I don't mean to do that."

"It's all right. Are you tired? It's a bit late."

"Maybe a little," he confessed. "But I don't want you to leave yet," he said in a quiet voice.

"Then I'll stay," she smiled gently. "Go change and brush your teeth. I'll be right here," she promised.

Harry hesitated, then nodded and hurried away. Alone in his room, she glanced around at the decorating he and Sirius had done. It looked like Sirius's handiwork, a Quidditch poster hanging over his bed and one for a Muggle band over his desk. Harry probably knew little about either one, but she was glad it wasn't just an empty bedroom. The colour scheme was mostly blues, his walls painted a dusty colour and his comforter a deep navy. It was soothing, safe, peaceful...everything Harry needed his sanctuary to be. But it was still missing a few things...things only a mother could provide. Smiling to herself, she reached for her wand and conjured a small lamp to set by his bed, then set it aglow with a tiny ball of fire and set an Imperturbable to keep it safe. On the ceiling, she conjured a few sparkling stars, just as she had done in his nursery when he

was a baby. She pulled back the blankets on his bed, then dragged a chair over next to it so she could sit by him all night.

"Wow," Harry breathed in wonder when he returned.

"Just a few extra touches," she smiled. "I hope you don't mind."

"Magic is brilliant."

"Yes," she laughed. "I always thought so. In you go," she insisted and patted on the bed. He climbed in beneath the covers, and then she covered him up and fussed a bit, making sure he would be warm enough. "How's that?" she asked him.

"It's nice," he answered shyly, his pale cheeks colouring a bit.

"I like your room," she complimented. "Is blue your favourite colour, then?"

"I...I'm not sure," he shrugged a little. "I like it."

"I do, too. It's relaxing."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Sirius changed the walls with magic," he added after a moment.

"I suppose it all came as quite a shock," she laughed softly. "I don't know if you knew this, but my parents were muggles. Not a bit of magic. So I know how it feels to one day discover there's a whole world you never knew about."

"Were you happy? When you found out?"

"I was terrified, at first," she admitted. "But later on, yes, very happy. I loved Hogwarts, and learning about magic, and later on, I met your dad. I'd say it all worked out for me," she smiled. But Harry's gaze faltered a little.

"Even after...after everything?" he asked uncertainly. "That wizard...the bad one. The one that tried to kill me?"

"There are bad people in both worlds, Harry," she answered softly, reaching forward to smooth away an imaginary wrinkle in his blanket.

"But magic gave me you, and your sister, and your dad. I could never regret a moment of that. Even when it's painful."

"I don't think I could, either," he admitted. "I thought I hated it."

"It must have been frightening to realise you were different and have no one there to explain it."

He shrugged and flushed again, and she fought back a smile at the shy awkwardness.

"Close your eyes," she murmured, daring to lean down and press a feather-light kiss to his forehead.

"Are you really going to stay?" he asked sleepily as his eyes fluttered closed.

"All night," she vowed. "You just sleep, Sweetheart. I'll be right here."

"Thank you, Mum," he whispered.

She thought she had cried enough, but hearing her son say the word after twelve years brought tears back to her eyes. He was drifting off now, and probably didn't even realise he'd said it, but that made it all the more special. "Good night, Harry," she whispered, then watched as his breaths grew slow and even. "I love you," she added to his sleeping form, then settled back in her chair to watch him for the rest of the night.

A/N: I am amazed with the great responses to the last chapter; you all are awesome! Thanks so much for reading and reviewing! I'm hoping to start getting chapters uploaded a bit faster, but I have some editing and tweaking to do, so thanks for being patient!

Chapter 19

Lily sat watching her son sleep for hours. She used to do this when he was a baby and the anxiety of the prophecy weighed down upon her, filling her mind with fear with him. She would climb out of bed and tiptoe into his nursery, pull up a chair, and just watch him sleep so soundly. His peace comforted her, reminded her that he trusted them to keep him safe. He had slept without fear, then, without worry about what awaited him. It always soothed and calmed her until she could go back to sleep herself.

Twelve years later, Harry's sleep was not so peaceful and serene. Now he was the one needing comfort, but she would gladly give it to him. When he was a baby, she couldn't possibly imagine what fate had in store for him, couldn't possibly guess that he would be taken from her and hurt so badly. But she was here now, and he was safe, and if she had to sit with him every night to chase away nightmares, she would do it without hesitation. Every now and then, his brow began to crease and his breaths would speed up, signalling the beginning of his distress. "Shh," she would murmur, moving in close to stroke his hair and cup his cheek. In sleep, her touch seemed to soothe him, and after a few minutes, he grew peaceful once more.

After a few hours, her own eyes grew heavy. The sound of his breathing lulled her into sleep herself, and she dozed for a while next to him. Around three in the morning, however, her pleasant sleep was disrupted by whimpers from the bed beside her. Her eyes shot open, and she immediately noticed Harry writhing in his bed.

"Shh, Love," she tried to comfort, snapping to attention as she moved closer to the bed and reached for him. This time, the touch frightened him more, and he ripped away from the hand she pressed to his cheek. "Harry, it's all right," she whispered. "Sleep. You're safe."

A quiet voice did nothing for him now, and he continued his struggle against the unseen demons. He twisted in distress, trying to fear

himself from the tangle of blankets, and she carefully stripped them back and straightened them before lightly covering him once more.

"Shh," she tried again. "Just a dream, Harry. Shh, everything is all right."

She thought for a moment he might be able to fall back into dreamless sleep. His whimpers quieted for an instant, and he grew still once more in the bed. Just as she started to relax, however, his body went stiff and he bolted upright, screaming in terror as his eyes shot open.

"Harry!" she cried in alarm, not even thinking. He panicked when he saw her next to the bed, his breaths speeding up into gasps and the screams following soon after. "Shhh," she tried frantically soothe him. "Harry, it's all right. It's me. It's okay. You had a bad dream." She held up her hands, trying to show he was safe, that she would not hurt him. "Sweetheart," she murmured, her heart breaking at the fear seeping out of him. What do you see? she yearned to ask, aching at the thought of nightmares so bad he woke screaming like this. Was it the long-ago terror of the night he was attacked, the flames licking at his crib and the light of Voldemort's spell shooting towards him? Did he have any memories of that awful night? She hoped not, but the alternative was hardly better. He was harmed without magic, as well, and the thought of him recalling the blows of the people who ought to have cared for him filled her with unspeakable rage.

Slowly, awareness returned to him, and she watched nervously as he struggled to calm himself. It felt like an agonising stretch of time as he slowed his panicked gulps for air and tried to control the shaking, a few tears leaking from his eyes. Sirius had told her he hadn't slept well...was this what he meant by that? She imagined a few disturbing dreams that woke him at night, perhaps a bit of trouble falling asleep and staying asleep in a strange place. She had not pictured screaming or gasping or writhing in the bed, and the thought of him enduring this every night...

The door creaked open, and the relief flooding from Harry was palpable. "Hey, mate," Sirius greeted softly as he stepped into the room to join them.

"Sirius," her son breathed gratefully. Something in his tone stung more than she expected, and she backed away as Sirius took a seat on the bed. Just moments ago, Harry was frantic at her presence. But he craved Sirius, and in fact, he seemed to welcome the arm that went around his shoulders.

Sirius wasn't completely insensitive. He gave Lily an apologetic look before turning back to his godson, but Lily knew Harry was more important than her own shock and hurt at the moment. And perhaps she should have expected this. Of course he wanted Sirius's comfort after something so awful. She had been back in his life only a matter of hours, and tentative ones at that. Sirius had been with him a month, had been through this with him any number of times. It was Sirius who usually comforted him, Sirius who usually appeared. In his panic when he woke, she was still just a stranger.

But understanding his reaction was quite different from accepting it. Her instinct was to hold him and chase away the demons, but Harry didn't want her for that. Her arms ached to enfold him and protect him, but Harry was not frightened, not comforted by her presence. There was nothing a mother wanted more than to soothe her child's fears, but she was more cause than cure.

Selfish as it was, she could not stand here and watch this. "I'll just fix us some cocoa," she offered quietly. Sirius met her eyes and nodded shortly, but Harry didn't even look up.

"We'll be there in a moment, Lil," Sirius promised.

She nodded and hurried away, unable to watch as someone else took up the role as Harry's protector and confidante.

Kreacher watched her suspiciously as she rifled through cabinets for mugs and cocoa. She didn't feel like using magic, needing an outlet for an anxious nerves. She missed James more than ever now, missed the way he always stilled her hands in these moments and forced her to accept the awful feelings instead of attempting to chase them away. He should be here now, sharing in this feeling of impotent uselessness when it came to their traumatised boy.

In an unwonted fit of rage, Lily seriously considered hurling a mug at the wall and watching it shatter. She had wallowed in grief and pain for a month, but this felt like the first time she truly acknowledged the

injustice of it all. Her pregnancy with her firstborn had been a mostly solemn affair, full of fretting and worrying about the fate of her unborn child. His short time with them had been blissful, but always with an undercurrent of fear and the ever-present knowledge that they were being hunted. For twelve years, she mourned a child who wasn't dead, a child who perhaps would have been better off if he was. Tonight she saw her first real glimpse into the missing time in his life and realised how truly horror-filled it was, and yet she could not be the one to comfort him. That role belonged to another, to a man she loved, but a man who had found him by chance and now took up the role she so desperately wanted. And the man who ought to be here now, step by terrifying step, had so thoroughly deluded himself with thoughts of guilt and self-loathing as to think his family was better off without him.

Having Harry return to them, alive and mostly whole, should be such a blessing they never again feared or doubted. Instead, they were being ripped apart.

"If you're contemplating the savage murder of my fine dishes, please don't," a voice attempted to tease. "Harry's cleaning himself up, then he'll be down."

The urge to destroy things instantly vanished. "Cleaning up?" she asked in confusion.

Sirius suddenly looked as though he'd revealed too much and sighed heavily. "Cocoa is a good idea," he told her.

She narrowed her eyes at him but fetched what she could find and began making three cups.

"He gets ill," Sirius said after a moment. "If he's too badly upset, he makes himself sick."

"Sirius," she breathed in dismay.

"It's happening less," he tried to comfort.

"It shouldn't happen at all."

"Agreed," he nodded. "He's been seeing a muggle therapist, you know. Think she helps. He had been sick every night, and now it's becoming rare."

She swallowed hard at the implications and wondered just how much damage she'd done by coming here. "Is it because of me?" she forced herself to ask.

"Lily," he chastised.

"No, I need to know," she insisted. "He asked me to stay. I thought we'd made progress."

"You did," he interjected swiftly.

"When he woke and saw me there...he was so frightened," she shook her head.

"He's disoriented when he wakes, Lily. It takes him a moment to place where he is."

"Don't," she murmured. "Don't try to make this better."

"Lily," he sighed.

"I know he needs more time. I know, I just..."

"I know," he nodded. "For what it's worth, I am sorry. It isn't me for any fair reason."

"I'm not mad at you," she whispered, more to herself than to him. Because she wasn't mad, or at least, she shouldn't be. Sirius was doing more for her son than anyone had any right to ask him to, and she knew how much he loved her boy. He always had, and he had always been willing to protect Harry with his life. She could never thank him enough for everything he did for them, for Harry, and dwelling on the injustice of it all was remarkably selfish of her when he was so willing to take care of Harry in her stead.

Before either could say another word, a pale-faced and bleary-eyed Harry stepped uncertainly into the kitchen. His face was etched with remorse as well as exhaustion, and the last of her resentment

fluttered away in the face of his struggle. "Hi, Harry," she smiled warmly. "Sit, Love," she urged, gesturing for a chair.

"I...I'm..." he began, and she could practically see the war inside of him. "I'm sorry," he managed after a moment.

"You have nothing to apologise for," she promised. "Sit down. I have cocoa for us."

He looked devastated about something, but he nodded in resignation and took a seat beside Sirius. She smiled sadly and turned back to the cocoa, trusting Sirius to offer him whatever he needed for a moment. When she joined them at the table with three mugs of cocoa, she noticed there were a few shimmering tears on her son's cheeks even as Sirius looped a loose arm around his shoulders. She wondered for a moment if she ought to leave and allow them to talk, but Harry looked so miserable she couldn't bear to leave him. He picked up his mug with shaky hands, still in his godfather's embrace, but then he set it back down at the table and let a few more tears fall.

"Harry," Sirius murmured and set down his own mug. They all sat and waited, but Harry didn't seem able to talk. "It'll be all right," Sirius added. "You'll see."

Harry shook his head mournfully, and Sirius gathered him a little closer. He murmured something Lily couldn't hear, then stood and walked off, carrying his mug with him.

"Harry?" Lily asked in concern.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered.

"Sweetheart, no," she shook her head, confused. "What is it you think you've done?"

"I-I ruined it," he stammered.

"Ruined what?"

"I asked you to stay."

"Yes, and that's perfectly all right, Harry. I wanted to stay with you."

"But now you won't anymore," he lamented, tears picking up a bit even as he tried to wipe them away. "I didn't mean to be scared. And then Sirius came, and I....and now you won't stay anymore."

Her mind reeled for just a moment as she pieced together the broken strands of an apology for something he had no control over. That unfamiliar feeling of rage returned now as she thought of the many adults who must have hurt him to break him down so terribly, to convince him that such an involuntary reaction from him was something worth punishing, something worth her anger and her disappointment. "Oh Harry," she breathed, very much fighting the urge to wrap him up in her arms.

"I'm sorry," he repeated once more.

"I meant what I said. You have nothing to apologise for," she said firmly. "Especially not a nightmare, or anything you feel after. And you're wrong, Love. I will stay. As much as you'll let me. I haven't been able to have you near me for twelve years, so I've quite a lot to catch up on."

He dared to look up at her, eyes swimming with doubt. "Even though I wanted Sirius?"

"Harry," she murmured, clenching her hands a little tighter around the mug. "Of course you wanted Sirius. He's the one who's been here with you. We're just getting to know each other. It's going to take a little time," she said gently. "I do hope that you'll start to let me be here for you, but when you're scared or upset, I don't care who you need, so long as someone takes care of you."

"You aren't mad?" he asked sceptically.

"I'm mad at so many people, Harry, but you could never be one of them," she promised.

"Who, then?"

"Every single person who dared to touch a hair on your head," she answered steadily.

He ducked his head and stared down at his mug again, but she wasn't quite ready to let the matter go. She suspected from his apology there was a lot he didn't understand about the way a child was supposed to be treated. Or perhaps, more specifically, there was a lot he didn't understand about how he was meant to be treated.

"Do you understand it was wrong?" she asked him softly. "For anyone to hurt you? Or be mad at you for a nightmare?"

"I....yes...I think so," he answered uncertainly.

"It was," she nodded.

"But...I did all those strange things. Only freaks..."

She sucked in a sharp breath of air as he so easily referred to himself in such a horrible way. "I do magic, too, Harry. So does Sirius. So does Lydia. And a lot of other children whose parents and guardians have never harmed them for being who they are."

Harry still didn't look up, and she decided perhaps it was too much too soon. There would be time later, plenty of time, to convince him how very special he was and how much more he had deserved. For now, she would settle for taking care of him as she always meant to do.

"Drink up before your cocoa gets cold," she urged.

"Sirius taught me how to warm up my tea again," he admitted.

"Did he?" she brightened a little. "We'll have to get you a proper wand soon."

"This one works all right."

"Your own will work much better. And it's a rite of passage," she added. "I'll

never forget going to Ollivander's for my wand. Soon as you're ready, we'll go, all right?"

He nodded, relaxing a little as he sipped at his cocoa. She kept up quiet chatter about her own experiences discovering she was a witch, grateful that he was finally regaining a bit of colour and looking a bit less miserable. By the time he had finished his drink, his eyes were drooping heavily, suggesting it was time for him to return to bed. "Are you still going to stay?" he mumbled as she escorted him back to his room.

"Of course," she smiled. The lamp was still burning by his bed, and she pulled back the covers and waited for him to climb in before tucking them around him and fussing far more than was strictly necessary for a boy of thirteen. If he was any other boy of thirteen, he probably wouldn't let her, but the need for reassurance and affection outweighed any teenage pride at the moment. She would cherish that for now, knowing he would probably reject it as soon as he grew a little more confident. "There. Think you can sleep?"

He nodded wearily, already fighting his fluttering eyelashes. "Aren't you tired?" he asked her.

"I've been dozing," she assured him. "And I'll sleep later. I want to watch over you."

He forced his eyes fully open and looked right at her, disturbingly solemn. "Can I tell you something?" he asked in a small voice.

"Of course you can," she nodded and moved closer to the bed, placing a gentle hand on top of his. He stared down at it for a moment, then looked back at her.

"I-I used to imagine what it would be like...if someone found me. Like...a family member. A distant aunt or uncle or something. Someone that was looking for me and...and wanted me...and would take me home." He swallowed, then twisted his hand in hers. "I never thought it could be my mum," he whispered.

It was nearly impossible to fight back the tears, so she didn't try. She tightened her grasp on his hand and leaned down to kiss his forehead. "I never dreamed I could have you back, Harry. I hope you know how happy I am." She smoothed back his hair and tugged the blanket a little more securely over him. "Go back to sleep," she murmured. "I'll be right here."

He looked at her for another lingering moment, then allowed himself to stop fighting slumber and drifted off to sleep once more. She kept his hand in hers even as his grip slackened, and she watched in the flickering lamplight as his chest rose and fell in the deep, easy rhythm of sleep.

James returned home through the Floo and immediately ordered Posey to fetch the firewhiskey. Days seemed even longer at the office without Sirius there, especially when the empty desk across the office reminded him where his best mate was. There was concerned chatter all throughout the department about the mysterious leave of absence from their most mysterious Auror, but only James knew the truth. It drove him mad, day in and day out, and he could do nothing about it.

Eventually the game would end. Harry would have to enroll in Hogwarts someday, and the elaborate make-believe they all took part in would come to a quick and decisive finale. Harry would make his choice, once and for all, and the life James Potter had known would crumble.

He was wallowing in self-pity, but he was too far gone to care. He ached now for his wife, he felt the acute agony of missing his daughter's letters, and there was a hurt for his son that would never truly heal. But he had to constantly remind himself that he deserved this, that he brought this on himself. He'd been an arrogant fool all his youth, and he thought Lily cured him of that, but even she wasn't a miracle worker. He could see now all the many mistakes he had made, from his pride at Hogwarts to his easy trust of those who didn't deserve it. He'd been hopelessly naïve in the midst of battle, and it cost Harry every chance he ever had at a normal life.

The irony wasn't lost on him. Harry survived Voldemort just fine. He came through that crisis with hardly only a lightning bolt scratch. It was muggles who broke Harry. It was fire and distance and foolishness that ruined his young, innocent life. If James had not been so blind, if James had not been so short-sighted, if James had been a bit more brave in the face of grief, they might have realised Harry was only missing. And with magic, it would have been so easy to find him. A few simple spells would have turned up their boy in no time. Harry had not ever needed to spend a single night away from the love and protection of his parents, but James crumbled when his son needed him most.

He knew what Lily and the others were trying to say. Perhaps they did all share some fault for what happened that night. But without him holding her back, Lily would have discovered the truth. Even worse, a flame freezing charm could have removed the danger in seconds. He later justified that the panic was too much, that it overcame all reason, but he knew the real terror of those flames. The house was already beginning to crumble when he and Lily came to, and the thought of finding his son like that had been too much for him to bear.

But it was his job to see them through the crisis, it was his job to keep a level head. The first time he held Harry in his arms, he vowed to him that harm would never befall him. He promised he would never let anyone hurt him. They had spent so many months so tense and frightened about their child's birth, and it all so easily evaporated when he held Harry in his arms and realised the lengths he would go to in order to protect his son. Then, in the moments that mattered most, he failed. It took only minutes for the terrible mistake to be made, and in those awful minutes, he doomed his son to twelve years of anguish. It didn't matter if Harry could somehow find it in his heart to forgive his father; Harry shouldn't do such a thing. If they wanted to make their son proud and confident, they should start by making him see how much better he deserved than a father who had so easily given up on him.

Two shots into his firewhiskey, the Floo roared to life. He glanced over just in time to see his wife tumble out, always a bit graceless with her entrance. It was the only time Lily faltered, and it used to amuse him to no end.

He found nothing about it funny today.

"Lily," he acknowledged evenly, trying to pretend the sight of her didn't nearly drive him to his knees. She was paler than he'd ever seen her, but she still seemed even more lovely than he remembered. There was something in her eyes, a new contentment that hadn't been there before, a peace settling over her and reviving that pure, beautiful spirit he'd fallen so in love with so many years ago.

"You're drinking," she accused.

"Guilty."

She clenched her jaw for a moment. "I stayed the night with Harry last night," she informed him, judging him carefully for a reaction.

His eyes widened in surprise. "W-with Harry?" he repeated incredulously. In spite of himself, a surge of jealousy rose up inside of him.

"Yes," she confirmed. "I went to speak with him yesterday. He's been so frightened and confused, James, but he's ready to see us now. He asked me to stay with him last night."

His hands trembled, and he had to set the glass down on the table before he dropped it. A harsh breath ripped out of him as he realised Lily had been with their boy and he hadn't. He never thought Harry might come around, so quickly, and now he had and James missed it. "How...how is he?" he couldn't help asking.

"He's so remarkable, James," she murmured. "So brave. He's not sleeping well, though. He wakes up in the night with nightmares. Sometimes they even make him ill. But he let me stay. We drank cocoa until he could calm again. He wanted me to stay with him while he slept."

He choked on his own despair and wished someone would kill him and put him out of his misery.

"He's worried about you, James," she added, unable to keep the bitterness from her tone. "Do you see how unfair that is? That our son ought to be worried about you accepting that he's alive?"

"Lily, that's not...God...you know that isn't how I feel," he defended himself uselessly.

"Of course I do, but Harry doesn't," she snapped. "All he knows is that his father has abandoned his family. And he thinks that's his fault. I have never wished you pain, James. Not ever. Not until Harry asked me if you would ever come back. I hope you're suffering here," she said flatly.

"Lily," he whispered miserably.

"He doesn't hate you. Don't you see that? Even knowing what you've done...that you left...he still doesn't hate you."

"I do want to see him, Lily," he murmured. "But you don't understand."

"No," she agreed angrily, eyes blazing. "I don't. I don't understand how you could stay away from our son after missing him for twelve years. I've been away a few hours and I'm aching for him again. I don't understand how you could willingly separate yourself from him. From us."

"Because he deserves better. And I'm no good for him, or Lydia."

"You may be right, but it's their choice to make and you've taken it out of their hands. And what about me? You promised a life together, James. How can you just throw that away?"

"I haven't," he shook his head. Tears welled up in his eyes, tears of helplessness and confusion and longing and his misery without his wife at his side. He had no idea how to make this right or where to even begin, and he missed her so desperately. Now it all just seemed too broken beyond repair, and he wasn't sure he had the fight in him anymore.

"I could forgive everything if you would come home," she whispered. "Just come home. Please, James. Harry's healing. We're healing. He'll want to come home soon, but it wouldn't be right without you."

"He is home," he countered harshly. "With Sirius."

"He does love Sirius," she acknowledged, "but he wants more than that, James. He's been without us his whole life. Don't you understand?" she pleaded. "He was always meant to be with us. He will be with us again, if you'll just come home."

"I'm so sorry," he shook his head. "I can't. I just...I can't." The traitorous words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, and he hated himself all the more as the last bits of hope melted from her face.

But Lily was strong. Stronger than him by far. She looked shattered for an instant, only an instant, then sucked in a deep breath and

composed herself once more. "Is that really what you want?" she asked quietly.

"No. No, of course it isn't. I want you, and our children, and I want...I want us all to be whole again. But I can't. And I already made all of you suffer too much to drag it out any longer."

"That's nonsense, James. Your guilt is just destroying us even more."

"All the more reason for you to stay away."

"Fine," she finally agreed. "Fine. If that's what you want, I'll give it to you. I won't fight for someone who can't do the same. But I'm going on, James. I'm going to get to know our son. He's letting me in, he's letting Lydia in. He wants a family again, but I will do it without you if I have to. But I suggest you think about this, long and hard, before it's too late. You will lose him. And Lydia. And me."

The tears began to fall now, and he wished he could think of something – anything – to make this better, to make it right. He wanted to cling to her, beg her to take it back, to promise she would be there waiting for him. But he knew that was unfair. He knew he couldn't ask her to wait for him to pull himself together. He owed his family so much more than this, and they should not have to pay for his faults. "I...I think I already have," he confessed.

"If that's truly how you feel, then you're probably right. You've already given up on us. The man I married never would have done that."

"Lily..."

"Until you're ready to tell me that you're coming home, we won't speak again. Understood?"

He wanted to argue and beg her not to go, but they were long past that. He nodded instead, and Lily turned sharply and Apparated on the spot. He drank three more shots of firewhiskey and passed out on the sofa, visions of fire and green light dancing in his head.

A/N: Sorry for the wait! I really did hope to start posting more chapters, then I decided I needed to revamp a bit, and I've been editing like a fool only to (mostly) go back to the way things were before. This chapter underwent some major revisions, however, to get things rolling. I think you'll see how by the end of it. I know you're all hoping to see James in this chapter, but he's coming, and before he does, one very big question is going to be answered. THANK YOU for all your support, amazing reviews, and for reading this long story! Keep reviewing, and Happy Easter to all who celebrate!

WARNING Mentions of child abuse in this chapter

Chapter Twenty

Harry stared down at his trainers, absently kicking at an imagined speck of dirt on the old carpet in Claire's office. The pretty therapist was attempting to wear him down and coax some information out of him, and after asking over a dozen questions, she had just grown quiet and allowed him to sit in continued silence. The tactic was beginning to work, making Harry feel on edge and anxious for her penetrating gaze to turn elsewhere. It felt as though she could figure him out if she just stared long enough, and it made him unbearably anxious.

A wave of irritation towards his godfather washed over him. He had known from the start this was going to be a bad day, when Sirius calmly requested to speak with Claire before Harry did. True to his suspicions, the moment he was called back to Claire's office, she quietly and gently began asking questions about his time with his mum.

But Harry wasn't talking. He didn't want to talk about his mum or the complicated feelings she stirred up. A part of him wanted to spend every waking minute with her, reassuring himself he hadn't dreamed it up and he really had a mother who was kind and sweet and patient and so, so beautiful. She was better than any dream he'd ever had of some guardian who had been looking for him. She was flesh and blood and pretty auburn hair and the sweetest voice he'd ever heard. She was quiet goodnights and soft touches and murmured words of comfort. He wanted her there, always.

And that's how he knew it wouldn't last.

He had never wanted something so badly in his life. Even when he first came to live with Sirius, he hadn't wanted so desperately to stay. It was warm and safe and there was plenty of food, but even then, he knew he'd either make it on his own or he would die, and that would have been quite all right with him. But having his mum around, having her there to run her fingers through his hair at night or to tell him stories as he drifted off to sleep...he never wanted to live another day without Lily Potter, and such a wonderful thing could never be his. He had been reminded of that, over and over and over again. Every time anything had ever seemed to be getting better for him, something happened and it was ripped away. Every time he thought a family would be his, something happened and they changed their minds. Even if things were changing now, even if he had a home and a guardian and all the food he could want, life was not supposed to be so easy for him. He could never have what he wanted most. It would never last, and for some reason, by choice or by accident, Lily would leave him.

He couldn't bear that. The thought alone made his throat feel like it was closing up, and his heart raced frantically in his chest as a familiar feeling of suffocation overcame him. He couldn't help a strangled sound as he struggled to regulate his breathing, and Claire's expression changed to one of concern as she rose and stepped cautiously but quickly to his side.

"Harry?" she asked him kindly, kneeling down in front of his chair.

Stubborn resistance urged him not to talk, even in his distress.

"Harry, you're all right. You're having a panic attack. Slow down and breathe," she urged.

He shook his head, trying to signal that he couldn't. Consciously he knew she was right, but the sensation of being unable to breathe was outweighing any ability to think rationally at the moment. He continued to struggle for breath, whimpering a little when Claire disappeared from sight.

"I'm still here," she soothed, just out of his line of vision. "I'll be back in one moment."

He tried to suck in a deep gasp, but his chest felt tight and restricted. He clawed at his shirt, trying to get it away from him, but then Claire

returned and held a paper bag up to his mouth. He jumped back, startled, but she placed a gentle hand on his arm to calm him.

"You're hyperventilating, Harry," she explained calmly. "I know you feel as though you can't breathe, but you're actually breathing too much. It's decreased the level of carbon dioxide in your blood, which is why you feel the way you do. I want you to breathe into this bag," she instructed. "You'll breathe back in the carbon dioxide you're exhaling. I promise you'll feel better if you can just do as I say."

She cupped the back of Harry's head and held the bag in front of him. He felt quite certain he would suffocate, but he was desperate enough to try it. He allowed himself to gasp into the bag, watching with vague fascination as the bag inflated and deflated as he breathed out and in. Slowly, the panic began to ebb out of him, and he drew in air a bit more easily.

When he was finally breathing normally, Claire lowered the paper bag but continued to watch him with some concern. "Feeling better?" she asked after a moment.

He nodded weakly, hoping against hope she would realise this was too much for today and allow him to go home.

"I'm sorry you're having such a hard day," she said sympathetically. "But we do need to talk a bit today, Harry. You had a momentous week since I saw you last. Can you tell me something? Anything?" she asked hopefully.

He still didn't want to talk about his mum, but he felt bad after Claire had helped him through the panic attack. "My mum came," he said quietly.

"Yes," Claire nodded. "I know. Sirius told me. Can you tell me something about how that makes you feel?"

Harry stared down at his feet again.

"All right, Harry," she sighed. "Let's try something else. I want you to tell me one word. Just one word that sums up how you've felt since I saw you last. You can think about it for a few minutes."

Harry nodded again and thought about all the things he felt since his mother showed up at Sirius's house. There were so many swirling emotions at the moment, confusing and contradicting, and it was difficult to pick just one. Elated that he was no longer alone. Worried that he would mess it up. Thrilled to be someone, to have a name and a family. Uncomfortable when she got too close, embarrassed by his reaction to her touch. "Scared," he finally managed, deciding it was the best for how he had – and still – felt.

"Good. That's very good," Claire nodded in approval. "Now, can you tell me why you're scared? Or what you're scared of? Are you worried that your mother will harm you in some way?"

"No!" he shook his head quickly, aghast at the very suggestion. Lily Potter seemed incapable of hurting a fly, and though he'd been tricked by people before, he was entirely confident his mum would never physically harm him. Not like the others had.

"Then what are you afraid of, Harry?" she prodded. "Sirius says your mother has been spending every night with you, and yet you're still with Sirius instead of going with her. Can you tell me why?"

Tears pricked the corner of Harry's eyes as he thought about that. He knew why – of course he knew why – but he wasn't sure how much he really wanted to tell Claire. There was nothing anyone could do to help him, nothing anyone would ever be able to do to make this okay, so why talk about it? They would only try to convince him his fears would not come true, and he knew with certainty they would.

"Your silence tells me a lot, Harry," Claire commented softly. "I know there's something you don't feel comfortable sharing with me. Do you think there's anything I can do to help you feel safe enough to talk to me?"

Harry shook his head again. "I don't want to talk," he forced out. "It won't matter."

"Why won't it matter?"

"You can't change it."

"Maybe not," she conceded. "But whatever it is you're afraid of, I bet it will be a lot less scary if you have someone to share it with. And maybe we can work out a way – together – for you to handle it. How does that sound?" she asked, lips turning upward in a slight smile.

He knew it was pointless. She could never help. But she would also probably tell Sirius that he was uncooperative, and the last thing he needed was to speed this whole process along. His mum wouldn't be pleased to hear about his refusal to talk like he was supposed to, and Sirius might be mad, too. "She's going to go away," he explained, trying to keep the emotion from his voice.

"Your mother is?"

"Yes," he nodded.

"Where is she going to go?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Something bad will happen to her. Or maybe she'll just decide not to come around anymore."

"I don't think that could happen, Harry," she shook her head. "Are you saying you'd like to have your mother around?"

"She's...really nice," he admitted.

"But you don't want to go live with her? You don't think perhaps that would ease some of the anxiety you're feeling? Maybe if you were there-"

"No!" he cut her off, shaking his head frantically. "No. I don't want to. Does Sirius want me to leave? He didn't...he said I could..." he felt himself beginning to panic again, but Claire quickly held up her hands and shook her head.

"Shh, it's all right," she soothed. "Sirius is only concerned about you. He won't make you go anywhere. No one is going to force you to do anything. I can promise you that, all right?"

He forced himself to nod and take a few deep breaths to calm himself.

"Can you tell me why you're so frightened about the idea of going to live with your parents even though you believe you would be safe?"

"I don't know. Just because."

"That isn't going to work," she chastised mildly. "Talk to me, Harry. You need to explain your feelings or no one can help you with them. I know this has all been so hard, but you have to let me help. You have to let Sirius and your mother help. We want to be here for you, but we can't if you won't talk to us. Tell me what you're-

"My dad doesn't want me," he finally answered. "My dad...he came once and told Sirius I should stay with him. He doesn't want me. And he won't come home because of me."

Claire grew very quiet and stayed like that for an uncomfortably long period. "Harry," she finally began carefully. "Do you really think that's true? That your father doesn't want you?"

"I don't know," he shrugged.

"I need you to answer me, Harry. Let's take a look at the evidence, all right? Your mum isn't what you thought she would be, is she? She's kind and loving towards you, right?"

"Yes," he agreed quietly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"She married your father and had two children with him. Your mum sounds like a very smart woman. Somehow I have trouble believing that she would be with him if he's the sort who would just decide he didn't want his son. And then let's look at Sirius," she continued. "He says your dad is his best friend, that they're like brothers."

"So?"

"So, do you trust Sirius? Do you believe that he would still be friends with your father if that's what he was choosing? I think you know that all these people in your life do love you, Harry, even if they don't know how to show it or make the wrong choices. But you can't punish them forever, or you only end up punishing yourself."

Harry frowned a little, not really certain that he was trying to punish anyone. "I'm not mad anymore," he admitted. "I don't really think my parents did anything wrong."

"I know, Harry," she nodded. "Believe it or not, what you're experiencing makes a lot of sense. I know how afraid you are of something happening to take this away from you. Sometimes when we get the things we want, it's hard to believe it's true. I know you're frightened," she acknowledged. "And I think your dad is the last thing you can cling to. He's the only one who hasn't come around yet, so you can keep clinging to him as an excuse not to leave Sirius and be a part of your family."

"That's not-" he began to protest.

"No one wants to push you into doing something you aren't comfortable with, but Harry, I think you need to take a good hard look at your relationship with your father and what you would like to see happen. I don't know him, so I can't tell you with complete certainty, but I'll eat my teacup if your dad isn't feeling so guilty he doesn't know how to cope. He was supposed to protect you, to keep you safe, and he didn't."

"He didn't mean to!" Harry defended him without even thinking, then flushed when Claire looked a bit triumphant.

"I know," she agreed softly. "But in his mind, I'm nearly certain he thinks he failed you. It's his job to come around, to be there for you, to speak up and to fight for you. But I just hope that you understand, sometimes you have to be the one to make the first step. Maybe your father is as scared of your rejection as you are of his."

Harry sat back in his chair, not sure what to think about it. It sort of made sense, from everything he'd heard about his dad from his mum and Sirius and Lydia, and he did tell his dad he didn't want anything to do with him. Maybe not right to his face, but the message had been fairly clear. But his mum still came for him, and his dad had left them, left his family alone. There was always an undercurrent of sadness in Lydia's letters when she spoke of him, and it terrified Harry that his dad might never ever come back, that he might be the sort of dad who would abandon his family, just like that.

"Do you think it's my fault that he left my mum?" he asked after a long moment.

Claire sighed and examined him thoughtfully. "Harry, I think you confuse being the cause for something with being to blame for it."

"What?"

"Meeting you again was what caused your dad to leave. Yes, it stirred up a lot of feelings for him, feelings that eventually made him come to the decision that the best thing to do was leave. But you're trying to cast blame, here, and to say it's your fault. But you didn't ask for any of this to happen. You're thirteen years old, Harry, and you didn't get to decide how this was going to play out. The truth is, no one in your family did," she explained patiently. "You've all reacted in different ways to situations that were entirely out of your control. I hope that soon you're all going to be able to stop assigning blame and work on fixing it instead. It wasn't your fault, it wasn't your dad's fault. The only thing you can do now is move on as best you can. You have to decide what you want the outcome to be. You either want to continue living with Sirius, or you eventually want to go home. You either want to be a part of your dad's life, or you don't. But no matter what you choose, Harry, you may have to be the one to act first."

The thought made him feel sick to his stomach. He knew the answer, deep in his heart. He wanted this family, he wanted to know his father. He had gone so long without knowing him, and sometimes it seemed he couldn't last another day without having him in his life. If he was honest with Claire, he would tell her he hadn't been able to stop thinking about the man, that he had even snuck into Sirius's study to look at pictures of his dad and marvel over how much they looked alike.

So what was holding him back? It was true...his mum and Sirius and Lydia wouldn't love a man who could be cold and cruel or give up his child. He knew now the fear wasn't rational, but he was scared all the same. And it was different with his dad for some reason, either because his dad hadn't come first or because Claire was right, and he was meant to trust his dad to keep him safe more than anyone else in the world.

There was another answer, though, another answer he didn't want to consider but had to all the same. It was the same reason he'd been terrified of Sirius in a way he hadn't feared his mother. Sirius had coaxed him into trust and shown so clearly that he would never raise a hand to him. And Harry knew now that his father wouldn't, either, that Lydia wouldn't adore a man who hit her and that his mum would never sit by and let that happen.

But sometimes knowing something didn't really help it. Not when he was so scared he woke panting and trembling. His dad was still a man, and he was still a stranger. And every time Harry thought about his dad before he fell asleep, his dreams found him in a closet with Eric Parker standing over him.

"Harry?" Claire inquired gently.

"I want to be done now."

"I know you do," she murmured sympathetically. "You've had a very hard day and you're being very brave," she praised.

"I want to go home," he repeated, now with a tinge of desperation.

"Just a few more minutes," she tried to coax. "Can you please tell me what you're thinking of right now?"

"No," he shook his head.

"Something's upset you, and I want you to try your best to tell me what it is."

He was quiet for another moment, not sure he could even bring himself to say the name. "Eric," he finally whispered. "Eric Parker."

"Who is Eric Parker, Harry?"

"M-my foster father."

Claire looked as though she'd struck upon a revelation. "Can you tell me about Eric?" she asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Did he hurt you, Harry?"

He hesitated, then nodded and drew his knees up to his chest, folding himself up in the chair and pressing his head against his legs. He didn't want to think about this, didn't want to consider what the word dad or father meant to him. Eric had never been either of those to him, so it shouldn't matter, should it? He was old enough to be better than this, old enough to separate bad memories from reality and know his dad was like Sirius, not like Eric. But his mind kept going back to it, back to the belt and the aluminum bat that left him so ugly and deformed. The green light and the screaming were bad, but Eric Parker was somehow worse. And ever since he started thinking about his dad, thinking about going home with his family, he woke in the middle of the night smelling that musty little closet, feeling the heat of the raging fever and the pain coursing through him in agonising waves.

He heard shuffling in the background, then the sound of receding footsteps, but he didn't want to open his eyes to investigate. He was safe here, in his little cocoon, and he would stay until the danger passed.

After a minute or two, a new set of footsteps joined Claire's and a hand touched his back. He flinched at the contact, not knowing or caring who was touching him, only that it was his back. "Sorry, Love," his godfather whispered, moving his hand to a safer place and gently ruffling his hair. "I hear you've had a rough morning. Let's go home, yeah?"

When Harry didn't respond, Sirius squeezed his hand. Harry registered the touch and the familiar voice, but he just curled further in on himself.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," he heard Claire apologise. "I pushed too hard before he was ready."

"He'll be all right, won't you, Mate?" Sirius asked him, though his reassurance sounded a bit weak even to Harry. "Come on, Harry. It's time to go home now. We'll have some tea and biscuits and then you can have a kip."

It took several more minutes of prodding and eventually pleading, but finally, Harry lifted his head and allowed Sirius to help him out of

the chair. His godfather kept an arm wrapped firmly around him as he murmured terse goodbyes and ushered Harry out of the waiting room and outside to the alley where they could Disapparate back home.

Harry stumbled a bit on his landing, even though he'd been doing better. He felt groggy and out of sorts and really just wanted his bed. Thankfully, Sirius noticed and didn't corral him to the kitchen for Kreacher's ministrations. Instead, he gently guided him by the arm, helping him up the stairs and into his bedroom. Harry instantly headed for the bed, wasting no time before crawling in and burrowing beneath the covers.

From underneath his protective mound of blankets, he heard his godfather's quiet sigh and the sound of him settling into the bedside chair left by Lily. "I'll be right here if you need me," Sirius murmured. "Try and rest, mate."

Harry clenched his eyes shut and allowed himself to drift away from the memories, away from the voices, away from the confusing emotions.

Sirius sat next to Harry's bed for half an hour watching his godson sleep and making sure there were no nightmares. Thankfully, the poor kid seemed too exhausted by the emotional upheaval to dream, and he remained almost eerily still in his sleep. When he was finally convinced Harry would be all right, he cast a Monitoring Charm – courtesy of Lily – and dared to leave the room. He would hear instantly if Harry was in any distress, and he had a feeling Lily needed to hear about this morning's events.

That was one conversation he wasn't looking forward to having. When Claire retrieved him from the waiting room and informed him of Harry's episode, she mentioned Eric Parker and asked if Sirius might know his significance. Unfortunately, he suspected he did. Though Harry had never spoken names before, there was no question that one family in particular had worked Harry over. Although Harry had led him to believe he had been abused and neglected by multiple families, the grotesque scars on his back were clearly inflicted in one horrifying act of unspeakable torture. And Lily had never seen those scars. Lily knew her child had suffered, but until she had seen the evidence with her own eyes, she would never know how bad it truly was.

Steeling himself for a long talk, he grabbed the powder and tossed it in the fire. "Potter residence," he called out.

"Sirius?" Lily answered just moments later as she crouched down before the fire.

"Hello, Lils."

"What is it?" she asked immediately. "Is something wrong? Was Harry's appointment all right?"

"We've had a bit of a rough morning," he admitted.

Her brow furrowed in concern, and she bit her lip as she always did when she was worrying about something. "Should I come over?" she asked, and he could tell from her tone that she was hoping he would say yes.

Well, he would just have to disappoint her. "No. Harry is asleep. He probably will be for a while. And actually, Lils, as much as I hate to say this, perhaps you should stay in tonight, get some rest yourself."

"Sirius," she frowned, a harsh edge to her voice. "What does that mean?"

"Just that," he sighed. "He had a difficult morning."

"Because of me?"

"No, of course not. Not directly, anyway."

"You think I've indirectly hurt him? Sirius!" she cried in distress.

"Relax, Lily. I only meant your presence might be stirring up other memories. Harry hasn't exactly had a wealth of loving parental figures."

"What happened this morning?" she demanded.

"I don't honestly know," he confessed. "He and his therapist talked about a family he lived with, but not in any detail. He had a sort of...incident...and they ended the session."

"What does that mean? Incident?"

"He was a bit out of it, Lily," he sighed. "Not really hearing us. He curled up and wouldn't look at me or speak to me."

"Oh Merlin," she breathed. "What did they do to him?"

"Listen, Lily. Harry has...he has some scars. He hasn't told me anything, but it's bad, Whatever they did...just give him some time," he advised, thinking of those first nights he had spent at the Potter home. James's mum had healed the wounds she could and bandaged those she couldn't, murmuring soft words of love and reassurance as she worked and letting him cry without judgment. That first night, the gentle, soothing touch of a kind mother was all he needed, but after that, it was harder to bear. After that first night, it was a reminder of what a mum was supposed to be, the way families were supposed to behave. It was different for Harry, of course; this was his real mum, after all. But the same principles applied. Lily's gentle treatment would probably only remind Harry of all the people who came before her. The love she offered was so foreign to Harry after the abuse he endured, and it had probably left the child hopelessly confused and overwhelmed. "He needs time," he repeated. "If he asks after you, I'll call you. Or perhaps you could talk to each other over the Floo."

He could tell Lily wanted to argue, but she was too noble and self-sacrificing for that. "All right," she conceded. "But please owl me tonight, after he goes to sleep. Let me know if he's better?"

"Of course," he agreed. "I'll talk to you in a bit."

He ended the connection just in time. A tell-tale high-pitch whine began, alerting him to trouble in Harry's room. James Potter, he thought, sighing with exhaustion, you are going to owe me a tropical vacation before all of this is said and done. Of course, he didn't really resent any of it, especially being with Harry, but he couldn't help feeling completely in over his head as he tried to keep Lily calm and see to Harry's emotional needs. James had spent many, many years practising the art of fatherhood, and now it had somehow fallen to Sirius to be father, best friend, and protector of a fragile, frightened child. Most days he felt quite proud of how he handled

Harry, but today, he was wondering if he was any help at all to the kid.

Harry was thrashing and moaning in the bed when Sirius stepped into his bedroom. He cancelled the charm and stepped to his godson's side, reaching down to still the frantic struggle against the bedclothes. "Shh," he murmured and pushed the hair from Harry's sweaty brow. "Harry, wake up," he encouraged and gave his godson a gentle shake. To his surprise, Harry jolted right out of the nightmare and shot straight up, eyes wide and mouth gasping for air. Normally it was difficult to rouse the boy from his troubled sleep, and sometimes it was only the terror of the dream itself that could wake him.

When Harry backed away, Sirius realised what had woken him so quickly. Harry had bolted away from his touch earlier, in Claire's office, and if all of this was about the abuse he endured at the hands of his foster family, he was probably dreaming about being hurt as well. A touch would undoubtedly cause him to react on instinct to protect himself.

"Just me, Harry," Sirius assured quietly.

Harry's gaze frantically searched the room until he recognised his surroundings. He relaxed then, but he remained where he was with the distance between them. Sirius decided it had been his best idea yet to keep Lily away tonight; Harry was in no state for a visit from his mum anytime soon.

"I'm sorry," the boy apologised quietly and clenched his fists in his sheets.

"You've had a difficult day, mate," Sirius acknowledged, fighting the urge to ruffle his godson's hair. Harry only nodded in agreement and kept his eyes averted. Sirius considered for a moment, desperately racking his brain for something that might help Harry or at least make him less embarrassed about his obvious distress. After a moment, a thought occurred to him. "Look at me, Harry," he requested softly.

Harry nervously shifted his gaze, meeting Sirius's eyes for only a moment before his darted away again. Slowly, Sirius lifted his shirt to expose two long, jagged scars across his abdomen. He did not

wear these scars with the same shame and embarrassment that Harry did; they were more a badge of honour for him, but the principle was probably about the same.

"Harry," he called again, forcing his godson to look at him. This time, the boy's eyes widened as he took in the sight of the scars. "I got these when I was sixteen," he explained quietly. "I told you my parents weren't very nice people. We never got on, and it only got worse when the war began. I got these from them the last time they tried to convince me of Pureblood supremacy. One from each."

"Your parents....hurt you?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Yes," he nodded. "This wasn't the only time, but it was the last."

"Why?"

"Because I ran away," he answered simply. "Same as you. Except I was lucky. I had your dad. And his parents were wonderful as well. They took me in without a second thought. It was your Grandmother Potter who fixed me up that night. But it left these scars, you see."

Harry nodded and dropped his gaze again. "They aren't as ugly as mine," he said quietly.

"I was older and bigger than you, mate. And I knew where to go if there was trouble. But do you know what else?" he asked gently, waiting for Harry to shake his head so he knew the boy was still with him and not slipping into another episode thanks to the bad memories. "I'm proud of these scars, Harry. They remind me what I survived. They remind me that my parents were bloody awful, but I was better than them. You're a survivor, Harry. You went through things no one should ever experience, but you're still here, aren't you? You're better than the people who hurt you. You are strong and brave and wonderful. You've nothing to be ashamed of."

"I had a panic attack in Claire's office," Harry confessed softly. "And then..."

"That's all right, Harry. Claire asked a lot of you today, didn't she?" he asked sympathetically.

Harry was quiet again, but he looked like there was something he wanted to say. "Sometimes," he began after a moment. "Sometimes thinking about my dad...it makes me think about my foster family I lived with. The ones who..."

"Who gave you the scars," Sirius acknowledged. Harry nodded, and Sirius had to fight the urge to squeeze a hand or ruffle his hair as he usually did when Harry was distressed. "I think it's only natural that you would associate one with the other, at least right now, when your dad is still something of an unknown. I had known your grandparents for years, and I still flinched when Mr. Potter raised a wand to heal me," he confessed, amazed how easily the words came when it was Harry he was talking to. He had not spoken of these thoughts or these feelings in all the years since it happened. Even with James, he had never admitted the difficulty, though he knew his best friend had struggled to puzzle it out on his own. He had never offered explanation for his behaviour, nor had he sought the comfort and advice of the boy as close to him as a brother. He was never the sort to seek solace, at least not in the form of venting emotions. But this was Harry. Admitting these things could help Harry. He loved this child as an infant, loved him beyond the grave, and he loved him all the more now that he was flesh and blood and words and sighs and difficult, tricky emotions. For Harry, he could lay his soul bare.

His godson sniffled and wiped clumsily at the tears streaming down his pale cheeks.

"I can promise you that your dad would never do that to you. Not in a million years," Sirius vowed solemnly. "I know why you feel that way, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. But it would never happen. It won't ever happen. He could never do that, and I would never let him."

Harry nodded, but the doubt was still there in his eyes. And then Sirius remembered the stack of letters James had given him, the letters he'd written to Harry each year on his birthday. Perhaps now was the time.

"I'll be right back, Love," he promised, leaning forward to wrap his godson in a quick hug. He stroked the boy's thin back and tried not to think of the scars marring the skin just beneath his shirt. When Harry returned to his parents, he was going to recruit Remus for a

little mission to hunt out these horrid muggles. For now, however, Harry needed reassurance, not revenge.

But revenge would come. When their boy was further along the road to healing, every person who dared to lay a finger on him would pay for their transgressions. And one man, in particular, was at the top of his list.

Sirius left Harry alone in his room for a few minutes, and Harry wiped the last of his tears away and fought back the shame he always felt when he'd cried like a little baby in front of his godfather.

When Sirius returned, he was carrying a thick stack of parchment. Forgetting his embarrassment, Harry craned his neck to read what it was. "Letters," Sirius explained. "I think you'll understand when you read them. I'll be downstairs," he said, then handed Harry the stack.

Harry took the first one off the top, recognising his own name written at the top but not the handwriting. He scanned down to the bottom, and saw it was signed Dad. But it was dated thirteen years ago.

Dear Harry,

Welcome to the world, my little man! You were born only hours ago, and you are currently nestled up with your mummy sleeping so soundly and quietly. I am assured this is a temporary arrangement, but a secret for you, my son...your cry is the only one that could never annoy me. It's true, Harry James. You are perfect in every way. So perfect that even your crying is perfect.

By the time you can read this, you will probably know all about the Prophecy that had Mummy and me so stressed. I am not too big a man to admit that I was terrified for this day. Now you are here, and I see again what an utter fool I am. The day you came into this world could never be anything but the greatest day of my life. You are amazing, my sweet little boy, and nothing has ever felt so incredible as holding you in my arms. This will, undoubtedly, embarrass you someday, but you are a very special baby, Harry, not only because you are mine. You have so many things ahead of you, but your daddy is going to be there every step of the way.

I'm thinking of waking your mummy so I can have another turn with you, but I suspect it is in my best interests to let her sleep. Your

mum can be a scary lady, Harry, and I'm sure you will learn that yourself before too long. You are destined to follow me into mischief, and your godfather will be only too happy to help school you in our ways. But somehow I also know you're going to be kind and good like your mum, and hopefully infinitely smarter than I am. I am proud of you already, Harry, and you have made me – us – so happy.

All my love,

Dad

Chapter Twenty-One

Severus Snape's black robes billowed around him as he stalked around the classroom, tossing intimidated glares at the foolish little brats making a mess of his classroom and stifling giggles as they botched each and every step of their potions. First years were the banes of his existence; their childish behaviour was not tempered even in his presence, and it wore on his patience more and more as term dragged on.

His gaze landed on one particular student, her sleek hair gathered up in its usual fashion and fixed with a garrish scarlet bow in an obscene show of House pride. Her quick little hands were more adept than those of many of her clumsier classmates, but she wasn't quick enough for him. He watched, narrowing his gaze, as a hand darted into her school bag and pulled out a few leaves. Stepping closer, he wondered what the child was up to and felt an odd, gleeful rush at the thought of more mischief-making.

Lydia Potter's behaviour at the start of term was irritating, but somehow, simultaneously comforting. She was as loathsome as her dunderheaded father, and Severus liked routine, liked predictability. He found immense gratification in being right, and it seemed the Potters were as rotten as he always believed. Lydia Potter was as ignorant, arrogant, and foolhardy as her miserable father, and reminding her of her shortcomings felt a little like payback for his years of torture.

Lately, however, Lydia's behaviour was troubling for an entirely different reason, and he found himself yearning for the days when he could simply hate her from a distance and punish her for each and every transgression rather than feeling this burdensome need to correct and guide her. Those impulses were typically reserved for only the most mature and accomplished sixth- and seventh-year pupils, not energetic first-years with an endless supply of questions and chatter and inane giggling.

More troubling still was his overwhelming lack of ability to put an end to their now-frequent conversations. His one reluctant word of advice had turned to many, and before he even realised what was happening, the child was a frequent visitor to his office after classes concluded for the evening. He would just be settling in with a hot cup of tea for his irritated nerves, and those bright green eyes, full of

hope and excitement, would pop into view. There was no stopping her then. For a tiny wisp of a girl, she had the tenacity of a mountain troll. No amount of sarcasm or disdain seemed to turn her away these days, and instead, he would receive an indulgent smile for his troubles before she would flit on to the next topic.

It was vexing, to say the least. He couldn't understand it, and the bewilderment kept him from completely losing his temper and ordering her out of his presence. The girl certainly had her share of admirers, with Remus Lupin at the top of the list. Despite a brief tension between the two several weeks ago, her relationship with her godfather seemed as warm and affectionate as ever. He often caught the loathsome werewolf beaming in pride across the Great Hall, and she had mentioned, more than once, sharing afternoon teas with the professor. She was clearly receiving adequate positive attention, so her frequent appearance in his office was an utter mystery. What could she possibly get out of bouncing in a chair and regaling him with unsolicited stories about her day? She often brought the most recent missives from her brother, insisting that Severus either read them or listen as she read them out loud. The exercise always resulted in another dozen questions about his thoughts on her brother or advice about what she should write in response, until Severus was ready to bash his head against the stone walls of the dungeon to put an end to it once and for all.

But he had also noticed something else lately. Each time the child appeared, he found himself strangely...pleased. Pleased he had not deterred her visits with his droll remarks. Pleased that he offered something Remus Lupin did not. Pleased that Lily's child respected and sought out his advice. And he had noticed a change in her as well. She was more restrained in his classroom, still obnoxiously bubbly and talkative but far more likely to hush with a pointed glare than she had been before. And the quality of her work was also vastly improved. Before, she never paid enough attention to her potions to turn in anything of any real quality, but now he often found her biting her lip in concentration as she diced and poured and brewed. Several of her potions were the best in the class, and her written work was similarly impressive. He still noted a tendency to ramble or expound inappropriately on a certain tangent, but she was demonstrating thorough understanding of the subject as well as hints of insight every now and then. She had made connections to other branches of magic, or drawn inferences he had not explicitly

noted. Just yesterday, he marked her essay with a remarkable E, and he had felt an odd measure of pride at her accomplishment.

So what was she up to today, then? Might she be reverting to previous behaviour? He took a step closer to examine the ingredient she was attempting to surreptitiously add to her potion and picked up a faint whiff of a familiar scent...spearmint. The child was adding spearmint to a simple pain relief potion. Not mischief then...innovation.

"Miss Potter," he addressed her, without even the faintest hint of kindness. She looked up with Lily's eyes, her expression placid but her lips quirking into the tiniest of smiles. "You will see me after class."

"Not again!" another Gryffindor protested, shooting Lydia an irritated glare.

Lydia stuck out her tongue and resumed work on her potion. An hour later, she turned in her potion along with the other students, and it was the same colour and consistency of all the most successful brewers. She gathered her books into her bag, then retreated to his office and took a seat across from him.

"You added spearmint leaves to your potion."

"Yes," she agreed.

"Explain."

"Well," she began, and Severus wished he had been more direct in his command. "Professor Sprout was talking about how some plants have no magical properties but can still be used in magical ways. I thought that was interesting so I asked her about it, and she mentioned peppermint. It tastes good, and sometimes you put it in potions so they won't be so foul, right?"

Severus nodded, impressed. All the professors knew she had a particular liking for Herbology – a natural talent, with her proclivity for nurturing. Herbology was especially useful for Potioneers, but not many students made the connection or took the time to study the links between plants and their viable uses in potions. "Why do we

not use peppermint more often, then?" he questioned her as a sort of test.

"Peppermint isn't neutral."

"Explain," he ordered again.

"It can affect some ingredients. And it can be bad for you. It can hurt your liver, or upset your stomach. But spearmint tastes good, too, and it won't do that."

"You may take ten points for Gryffindor for a well-thought addition," he offered.

"Really?" she asked excitedly. "It's a good idea?"

"It is," he confirmed evenly. "You will use caution in adding ingredients to potions in the future, I trust."

"I researched it first!" she insisted quickly. "I made sure it was safe."

"Very well."

In truth, it was quite brilliant for an eleven-year old. He would not tell her so and further inflate her ego – she was still a Potter, after all – but ten points would be incentive enough for her continued study and thoughtfulness.

"I can't wait to tell Harry! I actually got points in Potions today!"

A novel concept, indeed. He could only hope he hadn't created a monster. Thankfully, she was so excited about sharing her news with her brother that she didn't dawdle in his office, instead taking off for parts unknown to write another rambling letter. He watched her depart, wondering briefly at the odd mentoring relationship they were forming before turning his attention to the essays he needed to grade during his free period.

As he graded however, his mind drifted back to Lydia and to her mother. He was playing a dangerous game allowing himself to become invested in Lydia Potter's life. He knew, without a doubt, there were many people who would protest his role as any kind of mentor for her. He wasn't suited for it; he had nearly gotten her

parents and her brother killed. It was either sheer chance or exceptionally powerful magic that saved Harry that night, and the would-be murderer of a girl's only sibling should not be allowed in her presence. Lydia didn't know what he was, didn't know of his involvement. And even if he had, in some strange way, made her life possible, it was not nearly enough to redeem him or make him a suitable mentor for a naïve, innocent child.

His mood darkened as he contemplated his dark past. He told himself many years ago he did not care about people like James Potter, but he certainly couldn't deny that he still cared about Lily. She was likely unaware of the time he was spending with her daughter, and despite any brief feelings of warmth or nostalgia between them, she would not and could not ever truly forgive him for the hand he played in Harry's attack. How would she feel if she knew Lydia trusted him? And then there was Potter...James Potter had been proficient, even as a student, in a variety of painful and humiliating hexes. As an Auror, his knowledge had probably expanded exponentially. Severus did not want to imagine what the man would throw at him if he ever found out Lydia was spending time with him.

It was best to end this now, to break her before everyone knew the truth, before he could no longer hide it from her. With Harry alive, the time was rapidly approaching that he was found out. And when he was, everything would change.

He had just decided to inform Lydia their discussions were over when a frantic voice called him through the fireplace. "Severus!" Minerva McGonagall called for him. "Severus, come quickly to the Headmaster's office. It's Lydia Potter!"

"Harry, eat up," Lily encouraged as she glanced across the table and spotted her son picking at his lunch. Sirius had reported that the boy hardly ate before his appointment this morning, due to his nerves, and though he'd seemed in good spirits when he returned, his appetite still left a lot to be desired. She knew Sirius was doing a good job taking care of her son, but motherly instinct left her with an overwhelming desire to constantly feed the rail-thin child.

Last week had been a difficult week. Staying away from Harry had gone against her every wish and desire, especially when she knew he was struggling with something traumatic and painful. No mother

would want to step back and allow someone else to take care of her baby, but right now, she had to trust Sirius to do what was right. If Harry expressed any reservations about having his mum around, she had to stay away. It might rip her heart straight from her chest, but Harry came first. He always, always came first. And now she was learning when it was time to stay away and when it was time to draw close. She was getting better at reading him and sensing what he could handle at any given moment, and Sirius was quick to correct her when she pushed a little too hard.

Of course, she couldn't entirely accept his presence. For many, many years now, Sirius had been a brother to her. He and James were a package deal, and when Lily finally came around and realised she was in love with James Potter, she also started to see the good, kind boy who lurked beneath Sirius Black's brash façade. He could be maddening, but he was also fiercely loyal, terribly brave, and the very best sort of friend. He'd stood by them through everything, and she loved him dearly. But she also resented his intrusion into her relationship with her son. She knew it was wrong and it was petty, but Harry was still hers. It hurt to admit that anyone might understand him more than she did, even if Sirius did have firsthand knowledge of abuse.

It was a balancing act, to be sure, and some days she managed better than others. But Harry was letting her in. Slowly but surely, he was letting her in. And last night he asked her to come over after his appointment to help him work on some charms he was struggling with. It wasn't the warm hug or easy affection she craved, but it was a step forward, a step towards normalcy, a step that told her someday her little boy was going to come home.

A tapping on the window tore Lily from her musings and Harry from his lunch. "It's Artemis!" Harry said happily as he recognised Lydia's owl. Before Lily could make a move, Harry was already up and hurrying to the window, anxious for his next missive from his sister. It was on the tip of her tongue to order him to sit and finish his meal first, knowing he would forget all about it once he opened Lydia's letter, but Sirius beat her to it.

"Harry, lunch first," he said pointedly.

Harry huffed – actually huffed! – in impatient frustration, looking to Sirius with an expression that practically begged his godfather to

reconsider. It was the sort of adolescent attitude she wanted to see from her boy, but she had a feeling a similar order from her would have met with perfect, subdued obedience.

"Lunch," Sirius repeated.

Harry sighed and dropped into his chair, stabbing irritably at the fruit on his plate before shovelling it in. Well, if that was all it took to get him to eat with some gusto, she'd have to encourage Lydia to send owls during mealtime more often.

She was musing over that point when a tiny brown owl landed at the still-open window. "Oh no," she groaned, knowing all too well what that meant.

"Hogwarts owl," Sirius chuckled.

"Of course," she sighed and rose wearily to accept what was undoubtedly a nasty report on Lydia's behaviour. She actually hadn't received one since Severus spoke with Lydia, but that meant they were long overdue for a disruption.

"What's a Hogwarts owl?" Harry asked curiously.

"Your mum is quite familiar with them," Sirius grinned wickedly.

"As was your Grandmother Potter, Harry. I'm afraid your sister came by her talent for trouble naturally."

"Lydia's in trouble?" he asked in surprise.

"You'll get used to that, I'm certain," Lily responded wryly. "Your dear sister has been keeping the school owls busy delivering reports. She's a sweet girl, but Lydia has never met a person she didn't try to make her best friend, and she never has learned when it's her turn to speak. And she loves to find some mischief."

"Can't imagine where she would get that," Sirius shook his head. "James and I were the pinnacles of excellent behaviour. Must be Moony's corrupting influence. You ought to be glad you picked me to be this one's godfather."

Lily shot Sirius a pointed glare as Harry chuckled and turned back to his lunch. Lily unfolded the letter, recognising the handwriting of her own former Head of House.

Dear Lily,

I'm terribly sorry to owl again under these circumstances. Lydia's behaviour has been much improved of late, but I'm afraid there was a new incident this morning that has left me both troubled and concerned. Lydia was involved in quite the scuffle with her friend, Briallen Rees, this morning. I have learned from other students and from Professor Flitwick that the girls recently had a falling out, but Lydia has never taken to hexing other students as she did this morning.

The fighting in and of itself is troubling, and Lydia shall be punished harshly for hexing a fellow student. Upon further inquiry, however, I must admit I am not certain how to proceed. Apparently the argument began when Ms. Rees took a letter Lydia was writing. Ms. Rees shall be punished for the intrusion of privacy, but I do believe it was right of her to be concerned. There is no easy way for me to say this, Lily, but Lydia was writing to Harry. She grew quite upset and insisted her brother was alive, even after I questioned her. I do not want to suspend Lydia so early in her Hogwarts career, but under the circumstances, perhaps it would be best for her to be home. It seems she is not adjusting as well as we hoped.

I think perhaps it would be best for you to come to Hogwarts as soon as possible to discuss our next steps and escort Lydia home if need be. She did mention some troubles between you and James while in my office, and I do of course offer my assistance in any way you and your family need.

With warmest regards,

Minerva McGonagall

Lily was visibly shaking, both with anger and distress, as she finished the letter from the Deputy Headmistress. How could Lydia be so hotheaded and foolish? None of this had been easy on her, but they had stressed how very important it was for her to mention her brother to no one. Of course Briallen's interference was completely out of line and made things far more difficult, but hexing

the other girl was uncalled for, as Lydia very well knew. Now the only way to get her out of trouble and to ease McGonagall's understandable concerns about her mental state was to come clean about Harry. In one moment of bad temper and impulsiveness, Lydia had quite possibly ruined everything.

"Mum?" Harry asked nervously.

"What is it, Lily?" Sirius asked in concern.

She handed the letter over to him, then took a deep breath and turned to Harry. Her son had already deduced that something was terribly wrong and opened the letter from Lydia. "Mum!" he cried in distress. "Read this!"

"Harry..."

"It isn't her fault! Whatever happened, it's not-"

"Harry," she tried again.

"Read it!" he demanded, thrusting the letter before her.

A headache was forming behind her temple, but Harry was terribly upset. She accepted the letter and instantly recognised her daughter's quick, agitated scrawl.

Harry,

I'm SO sorry. Something bad happened this morning, and I'm in loads of trouble. Mum and Dad are going to be furious! I had to sneak away to send this, but you have to know how sorry I am! Please, please, please, whatever else you hear, know how sorry I am!

Love always,

Lydia

By the time Lily was finished reading, Sirius had finished the letter from McGonagall as well. "Mum? Sirius?" Harry asked anxiously. "What happened?"

"Oh Harry," Lily sighed, tears stinging her eyes as she thought of her children. She was furious with Lydia, but they had placed an impossible burden on a eleven-year old. Harry had done nothing wrong, but he was going to suffer, just as he always had.

"Why is Lydia in trouble? Is she all right?"

"She's fine, Love," Lily assured him. "But she fought with someone today, Harry. Her friend, Briallen. Briallen...she took a letter Lydia was writing...to you." Lily looked up to judge Harry's reaction and noticed her son had paled considerably. "Lydia lost her temper," she added gently. "She cursed Briallen and told her about you. Her Head of House is concerned and may suspend her."

His head snapped up at that. "What? Why? It's true! Lydia didn't-"

"Lydia has gotten in trouble before this, mate," Sirius interjected.

"Yeah, but-"

"Cursing her friend was a terrible thing to do, Harry," Lily added. "And now it appears that she's lying to get out of trouble, and Professor McGonagall is worried about why she would be writing a letter to you. I need to go to Hogwarts, Love. We'll probably have to bring Lydia home for now."

"I'll call James," Sirius offered. "He ought to be there for that, if she's being suspended."

"Wait!" Harry cried again. "I don't understand why she has to be suspended. Even if she did do something bad, she didn't lie! And she's not crazy!"

"Of course not, Harry, but Lydia's professors don't know that. I'm sorry, Sweetheart, but I need to go to Hogwarts and try to do some damage control. No matter what, I'll come see you tonight," she promised. "Even if I'm not able to stay all night."

Harry nodded mutely, and it took all of her strength to leave the table and leave her son. If she brought Lydia home tonight, it would probably put an end to her nights spent with Harry. Lydia couldn't be left on her own, and with Remus still at Hogwarts and James in his self-imposed exile, there was simply no one to look after her. Harry

permitted a kiss to the forehead, and then Lily grabbed her cloak and headed towards the fire.

"Wait!" Harry called after her a moment later, just as she grabbed the Floo powder.

"Harry, I have to-"

"Tell them!" he blurted. "Tell them the truth!"

"Harry," she sighed.

"I don't want Lydia to get in trouble because of me," he shook his head. "She should be able to tell her friends and not get in trouble. It wouldn't have happened at all if she didn't have to keep it a secret."

Lily couldn't argue with that, but they all understood that he hadn't been ready for the fame that came with being Harry Potter when he had only just learned who he was. It wasn't fair for either of her children, honestly, but Harry had been the focus of her concerns. Lydia, of course, had fallen through the cracks a bit, no matter how much they tried to avoid it. "This wasn't your fault, Harry," she assured him. "Lydia lost her temper and did something we told her not to. I don't want you to do something you aren't ready for to keep her out of trouble she earned herself."

"No," he shook his head resolutely. "It isn't fair. I don't want her in trouble for me."

"She'll be fine," Sirius countered. "And this isn't something to do impulsively."

"It has to happen sometime," Harry argued. "And I don't want Lydia to get suspended."

"I'll try to avoid that, Harry," Lily promised. "But this is a very big step, and you ought to think about it first."

"I've thought about it," he said boldly. "I want to do this. I'll tell everyone. Just don't let Lydia be suspended because she told the truth about me. She doesn't deserve that."

It was the kind of fierce familial loyalty Lily would have expected from her son, had he grown up a Potter, and it brought tears to her eyes to see how instinctively protective he was of his sister, how willing to put his own happiness on the line to spare her from trouble. A true Gryffindor, she thought proudly, even as her own motherly instinct told her not to let him do this. He probably had no idea what was in store for him when he went public, and she was worried he wasn't ready for it. At the same time, it was good to see him fight for something, good to see him stand up for something and defy both his mother and his godfather. He'd tried so hard to please them, and this was the first time he had really dared to speak against either of them.

"Please, Mum," Harry implored.

"Are you certain, Love?" she asked worriedly. "The press won't leave you alone. We'll do our best to keep them away, but you'll be all anyone talks about for weeks. You need to know that. You need to know what you're in for if you do this."

"W-what kinds of things will they do?"

"Nothing you don't want them to, Harry," Sirius promised. "But ignoring them can make things worse. They'll be speculating as to where you've been, what happened to you....everything."

Harry faltered, just a tiny bit. "Will it help Lydia?" he asked, his voice betraying a hint of his trepidation.

"Yes," she admitted softly.

"Then yes," he nodded. "Only...can I write her a letter? Really quickly?"

"Of course," she agreed easily.

Harry scampered up the stairs, leaving Lily and Sirius staring after him in wonder. "Can't say I was expecting that," Sirius quipped.

Lily frowned and bit her lip in concern. "Did I do the right thing?" she asked anxiously.

"He's right, Lil; it had to happen sooner or later. If it keeps Lydia from being suspended, perhaps it's for the best."

"And you'll...call James?" she asked uncertainly.

"Of course," he nodded. "James and I will handle the press, you just worry about Lydia and take care of things at Hogwarts."

Lily forced herself to take a deep breath and remain calm. This was right, this was good. They could stop living in shadows and stop worrying about anyone finding out about Harry. Lydia would have an easier time of things at school when she didn't have to keep the secret, and perhaps she could rely on her friends a bit more to get her through. It was worrisome that she was fighting with Briallen, her best friend since she was a toddler. It was worrisome that sweet, pleasant Lydia was fighting at all.

They all needed this, to be sure, but Lily could only hope and pray the cost wouldn't be too great for Harry, that she and Sirius would see him through.

The thought brought another pang. This time, she hadn't immediately thought of James. In the crisis, it was Sirius who thought to call James and Sirius who made sure everyone was all right.

One thing at a time, Lily, she thought sadly. One thing at a time.

"You didn't know, did you?" Lily asked tremulously as she hugged her daughter close and faced her former headmaster. Remus, Severus, and Minerva McGonagall were seated behind her, and Lydia was crying quietly as Lily held her close. She had assured the girl, over and over, that she was not in trouble and Harry was not mad at her, but the emotions of the day had clearly overwhelmed her.

Albus Dumbledore looked pale and old as he shook his head. "No, my dear," he said wearily. "I could never understand what had happened, but I never dreamed..."

Lily felt her heart heave a great sigh. She had always looked up to and respected Dumbledore, both as her headmaster and later as the head of the Order, but there was no denying that the man kept his

secrets. When she faced him today to tell him the truth, a part of her was terrified he already knew, that he had always known. From the man's stricken expression, it was clear he had been as clueless as them all. Harry had been lost. Simply lost. And if Albus Dumbledore hadn't known, how could anyone? It was just a huge, horrible mistake, and she was not the terrible mother she feared she was since Harry reappeared in their lives.

But the relief was tempered by the trembling child in her arms. She hadn't even

realised how much she missed Lydia until she was holding the girl again, and she desperately just wanted to whisk her baby away and have both her children safe at home, where she could watch over and protect and love and hold and never let them out of her sight again. Lydia just sniffled and pressed further into her before mumbling something incomprehensible. "What, Love?" Lily asked and straightened Lydia's hopelessly rumpled bow.

"You promise Harry doesn't hate me?"

"Oh Sweetheart," she sighed, kneeling down to look her daughter in the eye. She picked up her hands and squeezed tightly. "All Harry could think about was making sure you were all right. This had to happen sometime. Sirius and I will take care of him."

"Oh," Lydia nodded, looking strangely disappointed. "Not...not Dad?"

The mood in the room grew even more somber as Lily shook her head. "Your dad will take care of the press. He's helping, Lydia, in his own way."

"Professor," Remus spoke up, quietly addressing the Headmaster. "Under the circumstances, perhaps we could have a little leniency?"

Dumbledore nodded, then turned to McGonagall. Lily's former Head of House was looking more affected than Lily ever remembered seeing her, save for Harry's funeral so many years before. Her cheeks were streaked with tears, but she nodded quickly in acquiescence. "I think it's safe to say Lydia has suffered quite enough lately. A detention, for hexing a fellow student, would be sufficient."

"Thank you," Lily said gratefully.

"Of course, Lily, but are you certain you don't wish to bring Lydia home now? I think we all understand if perhaps she needs some time away. I suspect the news will create quite a stir."

There was nothing Lily wanted more, but she also had to question the wisdom of pulling Lydia out of school early. The Christmas holidays were soon upon them, and then she would have the well-deserved break she needed while still giving James time to change his mind and Harry time to decide he wanted to come home. If Lydia came now, it meant splitting her focus between her two children and spending less time with Harry. If Lydia needed it, of course she would do it...but she knew her daughter, and Lydia was not easily cowed or intimidated or chased away. If she wanted to stay at school, she would stay. The problem was, Lily couldn't be certain Lydia even wanted that anymore. From the way her daughter still trembled, perhaps Lydia was done fighting, perhaps she had fought hard enough and she was just tired.

"Lulu?" she asked her daughter gently. "I want you to tell me what you want. Would you like to come home now? You can come home today, if you'd like."

"But...Daddy won't be there," she frowned.

Lily shook her head sadly. "No," she agreed softly. "He won't."

"Harry either."

"He's still with Sirius, Love."

"I think...I think I want to stay," Lydia sniffled.

Lily was acutely aware of Severus's eyes burning into her back, as well as the sympathetic gazes of Dumbledore and McGonagall. But she couldn't think about that now. "All right, Darling," she agreed quietly. "That's fine. Why don't we go find you something to eat? You haven't had lunch yet."

"We can go to my office," Remus offered.

"You'll stay for a while, Mum?" Lydia asked hopefully.

"As long as you want," she promised, forcing herself to trust Sirius to see to Harry today while she took care of Lydia.

"Perhaps you could come see me before you leave today, Lily," Dumbledore requested. His tone was light, but Lily had known the man long enough to know when he was carefully masking his concern. A ripple of fear ran through her as she contemplated what that meant. He had taken the news well, giving away little, but that in and of itself was worrisome. Why was he not rejoicing that Harry lived? What did he know about her son that she did not?

The possibilities were endless, and more than ever, Lily wished she could climb into bed with James and feel his arms around her. "Of course," she agreed hoarsely. "Come, Sweetheart," she encouraged as she took Lydia's hand.

"Severus, a word," Dumbledore requested as they started out of the office. Lily turned to glance at him and noticed a flicker of fear on Severus's otherwise stoic face.

The sinking feeling returned, and Lily tightened her grasp on Lydia's hand. Once more, her family was in the centre of chaos, and she had a terrible sense the trouble was just beginning.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Severus Snape sat still and silent in the Headmaster's office, meeting the cool, penetrating gaze of his mentor and redeemer. The old man was known for his infamous twinkle, but those blue eyes were dull now, full of the regrettable look of a man who knows something he desperately wishes he did not. Severus had no words for the man, and for his own sake, for the sake of his nerves, he would say nothing until the Headmaster asked it of him.

"You were unsurprised by the news," Dumbledore finally announced.

Severus would not deny it. "Lily informed me herself. After I had behavioural difficulties with Ms. Potter."

"I see," the headmaster nodded, leaving out unspoken recriminations for failing to bring this crucial knowledge forward. "Is there anything I ought to know about...old friends?" he inquired.

"I am uncertain," Severus admitted. "It has not passed without notice that Sirius Black has mysteriously vanished from the Ministry. If they intend to make the knowledge of his survival public information, backlash would not be surprising."

"Lucius?"

Severus only nodded, leaving the headmaster to stew in his concerns. It was another quarter of an hour before Dumbledore deigned to speak again, and when he did, it was with a weary sort of confidence, an unshakeable conviction that Severus was hiding something truly awful.

"I think it's time, Dear Boy," Dumbledore began, "that you tell me the truth."

Dumbledore was right, but Severus would not give in so easily.

"The truth? I'm afraid I have no idea what you mean, Headmaster," he answered in a silky monotone he mastered years ago.

"You are a powerful Occlumens, Severus, but even your exceptional mind appears troubled," Dumbledore stated sagely. "I should think

your grief absolved by the miraculous news that Lily Potter's son lives."

"I caused her much pain," he answered as evenly as possible in the hopes the old man would be too distracted by the admission of remorse to prod further.

Such hopes always proved in vain with Albus Dumbledore.

"Then perhaps I should be blunt. Lily Potter intended to die for her son. That much is clear. Her powerful magic protected him, but it does not explain why she lives. It has troubled me for many years, but I saw no point in asking given the state of things. It is clear I can no longer continue in ignorance. Explain to me, Severus, how Lord Voldemort, who never showed his victims mercy, left James and Lily nearly untouched that night."

"If you believe he confided in me, Headmaster, I must disappoint you."

"The Longbottoms were tortured to insanity, Severus," Dumbledore countered, his tone never changing despite the challenging flicker of his blue eyes. "No one was left alive on Voldemort's quest to destroy the child he chose as his equal. Why, then, would he leave James and Lily Potter?"

It was a question no one had dared ask in twelve years. He had thought, for so long, he would be caught in his lies, in the deception he had waged on them all. But Harry Potter was dead, and the mere infant had taken with him the most powerful Dark Wizard the world had ever seen. By the time the smoke cleared over Godric's Hollow, no one dared to ask questions, even those that ought to be so glaringly obvious. Severus had believed for so many years that someone would finally come looking, that someone might finally wonder how it was that Voldemort had barely made a scratch on James and Lily Potter the night he came after their son. But not even Dumbledore had asked. The relief was too great – as was the pain – for anyone to question a trivial matter such as inexplicable mercies from a man who offered none.

The time was upon him, Severus sensed, that he could no longer conceal the truth from anyone. Dumbledore had spoken for years about Voldemort's return, and now that Harry Potter had returned

from the dead, it seemed all the more likely that Voldemort would someday be resurrected. He had evaded his sentence these twelve long years, but he could avoid it no longer.

"What have you done, Severus?" his mentor asked him quietly.

Twelve years earlier

Severus's muscles and bones quaked with the after-effects of his master's curse, every nerve in his body crying out in pain. The Dark Lord was an expert in administering pain, and the force of it could rip every rational thought and feeling from a man's mind, leaving him with only this sensation and the overwhelming desire to die. Even now that the curse had faded, he shook in agony and prayed for the end.

He was right where the Dark Lord wanted him: willing to give anything, anything at all, to make it stop.

"Your attachment to the vile Mudblood goes deeper than I dared imagine," his master hissed, lowering himself so Severus could hear him through his own whimpers. "You have betrayed me, Severus. Betrayed me for her."

"I'm sorry," he choked, knowing there was nothing more he could do for himself. Denying it would be no good now. He was too weak and tired to fight Legillimency, and the Dark Lord knew everything now. He knew Severus had gone to Dumbledore, he knew he had made a deal to serve the Order in exchange for Lily's life.

It wasn't his own suffering that made him cry out now for death, but the knowledge that he had failed her in this one last attempt to spare her life. He had only wanted her to live, and now he condemned her to death once more. The Dark Lord would certainly kill her now, and likely in front of Severus. The only consolation was knowing he wouldn't outlive her for long, but Lily...no, not Lily. Please not Lily.

"My first thought was to kill her for your treachery. To do it in front of you so you would know the price of your sins against me."

"Please, no," he begged shamelessly. "I only went to Dumbledore because-"

"Because you feared for the precious Mudblood and did not take your master at his word."

"I didn't-"

"Quiet!" Voldemort screamed, and Severus shuddered again in agony. "I could do it. I could kill her right in front of you. I'd kill her husband first, and then her son. She would know it was your fault, that you sentenced them all to death. She would die hating you. Is that what you want?"

"No!" he cried. "No, please, no! I will do....anything. Anything."

The satisfaction on the Dark Lord's face told Severus more than he ever wanted to know. He was playing right into Voldemort's plans, and there was nothing he could – or would – do to stop it.

"As it so happens, my plans have changed," the Dark Lord informed him, lips twisted into a cruel, vicious smirk. Severus wondered now how he had ever been so blind, how he had ever followed this lord in search of power. The whole world was damned, and though it had always been so for Severus, it wasn't for her. And now it would be, because of him.

He never wanted this. Not ever. But he had turned away when she gave him a chance to repent, and now they would all pay the price for his folly.

"It occurs to me now," the Dark Lord continued, "that your love for the Potter woman could work to my advantage. I find myself in need of a willing servant, one who can become close to Dumbledore. You have been a fool, Severus, but I am a merciful Lord, and I shall give you another chance. I'll even spare the life of your Mudblood, should you do as I say."

"Yes!" he agreed instantly, not caring what the terms may be.

"Tell me, Severus, have you ever heard of a Loyalty Bond?"

Severus managed to shake his head.

"Ah, I suspected as much. It is an ancient Dark Magic, long ago fallen out of favour due to certain...impracticalities. It must be

willingly taken, you see. The Imperius Curse has so wonderfully served my purposes, but I grow weary of its complications. The Loyalty Bond...it is truly beautiful magic, Severus, the sort of power only one such as I can wield."

"My Lord?" he questioned weakly, too exhausted to fight for understanding.

"Should you agree to my terms and take the Bond, you will become loyal to me. You will have no other say in the matter. My orders will be carried out, whether you wish to follow them or not. You see," he went on, sounding almost conversational, as though they weren't discussing some of the darkest magic in existence. "Your soul would become mine, Severus. The moment I issued a command, your ability to fight it would instantly disappear. You would turn your own wand on yourself without so much as blinking an eye. Stronger then, than the Imperius Curse, which at times has been broken, or evaded by a particularly clever wizard. The Loyalty Bond offers no such tricks. My orders would be obeyed. If I ordered you to kill Dumbledore, no meddlesome conscience would ever get in my way."

Voldemort was talking servitude, of the highest form. Servitude that would not even allow death as an alternative. Except, Voldemort said the moment a command was issued, the magic was triggered. That meant...

"And Lily?" he asked weakly, the wheels churning even now in his slow, sluggish, pain-addled mind.

"Her son is marked for death. There is no saving him. But we can make a deal, Severus. I'll spare your filthy little pet in exchange for the Bond. Is she worth that to you?

Yes. A million times, yes. He would pay any price to spare her. But there was one more thing he owed her, one more thing he could do for her. It would never be enough, but it was all he had left to offer her. "Her husband," he choked out, knowing that Lily would break if both her husband and her son were taken from her. He would never have her now, he knew that well enough and had known it since the day she last turned him away. He could do this last thing for her; the boy was already sentenced to his fate, but Lily didn't have to be. Lily, he could still save, and as much as he loathed it with every piece of

himself, James Potter was the only one who could give her the life she deserved after suffering the loss of her infant boy.

"I have underestimated you, Severus. You love her, and yet you will spare her husband out of the goodness of your heart? It is truly a tragedy."

"Both of them," he managed through the pain. He hardly knew what he was swearing, but he could spare Lily. It was all that was left for him, all that could ever be left. "Both of them, and I will take the Bond."

"We have an agreement."

"I want proof," he demanded as he started to pull himself off the stone floors of the dungeons. He had discovered his one and only out, the only way he could avoid becoming a weapon of destruction. He saw the weakness in this agreement; the Dark Lord could agree to spare Lily now, then order Severus to kill her later. He had to put an end to this before Voldemort could issue the order. He needed time. He needed to save Lily, and then...

"Mind your place, Severus," the Dark Lord hissed.

"I will take the Bond now. But I want proof that she lives before my orders are given. An Unbreakable Vow. You will spare Lily and James Potter."

"Very well," Voldemort agreed. "Now, give me your hand."

"A Loyalty Bond," Dumbledore repeated, his voice strangely shaky and thin.

"Yes," Severus agreed quietly.

"My dear boy..."

"Did you truly believe he wouldn't suspect me, Albus?" He lacked the energy or the will to sneer, but his tone dripped with the acid he managed to hold back all these years. The Headmaster had been all too anxious to believe it would be this easy, that he could offer Severus an out without consequences. He had been naïve and a fool, and sometimes Severus hated him for it. The old man so truly

believed the life of a Death Eater was spared and transformed, when nothing could be further from the truth. He had been sentenced to Hell instead, and it never once occurred to this brilliant mind. "Did you truly believe he would not know I had turned to you?" he asked accusingly.

"But the Loyalty Bond, Dear Boy," the headmaster shook his head. "And so you would have killed me in exchange for her life?"

There was nothing he wouldn't have done for her. That was what Dumbledore always failed to understand. It was what Voldemort himself had always failed to understand. He would stop at nothing to save Lily. She had been the only pure, good thing in his life, and he would have killed for her. More importantly, he would have died for her.

There was a surprising flicker of pain in the Headmaster's eyes. "My boy," he shook his head. "I could have helped you."

"You couldn't," he snapped. "Her life came first. It was the only way I could be entirely certain he would save her. He swore an Unbreakable Vow in exchange for the Bond. Lily and her husband would not be killed. There is no way to break the Bond, once the spell is completed. There was nothing you could have done. His mistake was believing I would do anything to spare my own life. The moment the Potter boy was dead, I intended to kill myself."

"His greatest failing was always his inability to understand love," Dumbledore agreed wearily. "But then he perished, and you were granted a reprieve. There was no longer cause for such drastic measures."

The words held the unspoken implication that troubled Severus now. Potter's rather miraculous survival called into question everything that happened that night. Those drastic measures might not have been necessary then, but they still might be again.

"I am no fool, Albus."

"And you are still willing to make such a sacrifice?"

"I always knew something might go wrong. I had twelve years of freedom. It was more than I asked for...or expected."

"Will you let me examine you? For the spell? We can determine if it remains."

Severus knew, in his soul, the evil still lurked. He felt it sometimes, felt the tug of the darkness that forever tainted him. His arm would always bear the horrid mark he had so foolishly welcomed in his ignorant youth, but the unseen mark on his soul was worse. The pain was not the sharp burn of his Dark Mark, but a deeper, lasting, haunting ache.

"Yes," he agreed anyway.

Dumbledore rose from his desk and drew his wand. His hands remained steady, despite the look of grief etched on his wizened face. As he silently cast a spell to detect the presence of Dark Magic, Severus found himself somewhat surprised by the old man's reaction. When he first came to Dumbledore over a decade ago and asked for his help in protecting Lily, there was nothing between them but animosity. Dumbledore was disgusted by his appeal, by his lack of concern for James and Harry, and Severus had thought their relationship was based on mutual reliance, not actual respect.

But now, it seemed, the Headmaster was genuinely upset by the revelation that Severus's life would come to its final, tragic end in the near future. It was oddly fitting, Severus mused darkly, that he would forge relationships at the end of his life.

"Oh Severus," Dumbledore breathed as he lowered his wand. "The curse remains."

Severus did not react. He had expected this, prepared for this. He contemplated this very fate for twelve years. Voldemort's apparent death brought him more time on this wretched earth – but it was time he had never wanted. He accepted his lot the moment he swore the vicious curse. He accepted the inevitability of his death because it was the last and only thing he could do for Lily, the only way to prove he loved her after all he had done. He wronged her so grievously, and yet in death, he protected her and showed her that in the end, her message had won. He fought too long for the wrong side, for the side that would kill her, maim her spirit, destroy her life and her family. He fought too long for a man so evil that he would eradicate the only thing beautiful and pure in Severus Snape's life.

In death, Lily was spared. In death, he spared her husband, one final gesture to prove that her happiness meant more to him than his own. By taking his own life before Voldemort could compel him to do more evil, he showed Lily for the last time that her goodness had been the greatest force in his life.

Twelve years ago, he was ready for death. Then Lily's son was murdered and Voldemort taken with him. She came to him and sobbed, her pain so raw and so fresh he had wanted to take her in his arms and weep for her. His soul bled that night for the woman he loved, the woman who would never be the same. He was a fool to believe Voldemort's promise to leave Lily untouched could be true. In killing her son, he harmed Lily more than any curse. She would rather die than lose her son and had in fact attempted to sacrifice herself for him. Severus had taken that choice out of her hands. Severus had sentenced her to live in a world without her child. She kept her husband but lost her son, and it was his fault.

It was the coward's way out to die when there was no longer reason. And no matter how sincerely she wished him dead that night, she would blame herself, he knew. She would blame herself for letting him turn to the Dark. She would blame herself for pushing him to suicide. She could bear no more, and he could not be the cause of another ounce of suffering.

Now a time was approaching that he might be called to die again. If Voldemort returned, the possibilities were too awful to consider. Without free will, without choice, what might he be forced to do? Would he be the one to kill James Potter? Would he see the anguish and betrayal in Lily's eyes as her husband was murdered by a man she once called friend? Would he be the one to kill Harry? Would he take from her the son who was so recently restored? Or might it be Lydia? Lydia, who so inexplicably trusted him? Lydia, who like her mother, placed her faith in the one who least deserved it. Lydia, who gave him another chance at redemption.

Somehow, it was the idea of harming Lydia that hurt him most of all. She was so like Lily in ways he had not expected, full of that same easy acceptance and forgiveness, her heart so good that he felt his ice melt around her. He would never again have Lily's friendship, but she had somehow given him this child who respected him, who looked up to him as a mentor, who accepted what he was without flinching.

He wanted to live to see her become great, to see her excel in her own ways, beyond the shadow of her miraculous brother or her brilliant mother or her beloved father. He wanted to live to see Lydia Potter as the great force she was, all on her own. But the moment Voldemort learned of his attachment to a child – and a Potter child, at that – he would exploit it. And Severus would kill her before he even knew what he was doing. He would kill her without choice. He would watch the life flicker from those eyes as she wondered how he could betray her like that.

There was no choice for him. None at all. He unintentionally but inextricably linked his life to the Potters, and he could not cause Lily grief again. He could not kill her son, nor her daughter. He could not even kill James Potter, whom he had hated since he was a boy.

"You know what this means," Dumbledore said.

"Yes," he nodded firmly. "When the proper time comes, I will...see to it."

Dumbledore's eyes flickered with pain, but he did not protest. And Severus knew he couldn't. If there was any other way for him, the Headmaster would offer it now. If there was any hope of stripping him of this curse, Albus Dumbledore would stop at nothing to find it. That he would only concede his defeat assured Severus of what he already knew: the curse was final and inescapable.

With nothing left to say, Severus stood and walked slowly towards the door. "Severus," Dumbledore called after him. "Does Lily know?"

He didn't turn around. "No. And she never will."

On a formidable island miles out to sea sat Azkaban Prison. Even Muggles, clueless as they were, avoided the chill that seemed to seep from the place, the darkness that oozed out from beneath the enchantments that protected its existence. It was a dreadful place to be, for any reason at all, and even Lucius Malfoy fought back shivers as he approached the fortress.

The stone walls of the prison were ancient and tingling with the magic layered over this place for centuries. It was magic that Lucius himself had narrowly avoided, through careful use of connections

and ingenious pleading of the Imperius Curse. He had no desire to be here tonight, his old fears coming to life as he stepped ever closer to the place that was nearly his prison, but there were more important things to worry about now.

He had heard the rumblings, of course, two years ago when his son was in his first year at Hogwarts. He hadn't been certain whether to believe the rumours whispered in dark alleys and dark homes by dark wizards; there was a measure of wishful thinking to all of it, he assumed, a desperate wish for a return to the greatness they all lived before that blasted infant sent them all to hell. Their way of life had been driven underground, shamed, and they had all been forced to hide and to lie and to beg the mercy of filthy half-bloods and traitors and Mudbloods.

It was no way for a proper wizard to live, and it was all too easy to be deluded into believing things might be different again even in the absence of real, proper evidence.

But now there was proof. Proof that it didn't happen the way they were told. Proof that there might be something they had all missed. If Harry Potter, a helpless infant, had survived whatever happened twelve years ago in Godric's Hollow, there was every reason to believe He had as well.

And so tonight he was on a mission. A very important mission. A critical mission delegated to him by those who still respected what he had once been, who still believed that he held power and might and truth. He would be great again, when all was said and done. His years of currying favour in the Ministry were over, though they had served him well. He was now the only one armed with the proper knowledge, the only one who had bothered to concern himself with the affairs of his former enemies.

He had been watching. Oh yes, he had been watching, and it was thus he who would play the critical role in returning their master to his former glory. In return, Lucius would be rewarded, his family blessed, his success assured.

Tonight was only the beginning. He would brave Dementors and the ghosts of what could have been and nearly was. He would endure these hours, and soon, oh so soon, he would have his life, his glory, and his power restored.

Chapter 23

Harry Potter: The Boy Who Lived!

In a shocking turn of events today, the Wizarding World is abuzz with the news that Harry Potter, defeater of You-Know-Who, has been found alive. James and Lily Potter, parents of the famed infant who mysteriously vanquished You-Know-Who twelve years ago, came forward today to announce that their son was recently located. Harry Potter, who was sixteen months old at the time of attack, was believed to have perished in a massive fire immediately following his miraculous defeat of You-Know-Who. Experts speculated the fire was the result of a magical explosion, but the Potters have offered no explanation as to their son's survival of the incident.

"At this point, we can only guess about what happened, and I see no point in attempting to explain what we ourselves do not yet understand," James Potter told reporters. "Everyone believed Harry was dead, but forces were at work that night we are only just beginning to comprehend. What matters now is that Harry is indeed alive and has returned home."

There is no word yet on where The Boy Who Lived has been for the last twelve years, or even his present whereabouts. Harry is thirteen now, but James Potter offered no details about his future education or when – and if – he will begin his schooling at Hogwarts. Sources at Hogwarts have revealed some rocky times ahead for the Potter family; Harry Potter joins a sister, Lydia, who began her Hogwarts education this year. The news of Harry's survival came shortly after an incident involving Lydia, but our sources were unable to uncover further details.

James Potter was reluctant to share any information regarding his son's current status, and the family remains closed to interviews at this time. "Our family is obviously overjoyed to have Harry back. We appreciate the patience and understanding of the Wizarding World as we adjust as a family, and we respectfully request our privacy as we heal from the many years we spent apart."

We certainly wish the Potter family the best and thank young Harry for his services to the Wizarding World.

"James Potter, you are an arse," James sighed and crinkled up his newspaper, tossing it listlessly across the kitchen before taking another huge swig of firewhiskey. "Full of rubbish," he added, and then another drink. "Complete pillock." Drink. "Worthless. Bloody. Wanker."

Dropping all ceremony, he drained the glass and poured another before retrieving the paper, smoothing it out, and reading it once more.

He had been doing this all night. He skivved off work today and turned off his Auror Alert, making sure no one from the Ministry could summon him in. He didn't want to face the well-wishers and gossip-mongers and nosey parkers at the Ministry, but the owls had kept him busy anyway. Every reporter in the wizarding world wanted to talk to him and his family, and he spent most of the day politely informing people they could bugger off.

There were a few not-so-polite letters tossed in the rubbish bin. A voice in the back of his mind (which sounded suspiciously like Lily) had insisted he re-write them, thanking the adoring fans for their support but refusing any and all attempts for an audience with The Boy Who Lived.

"Bloody horrible moniker," he cursed irritably. Was no one in this world decent enough to just call his son by name? Was it not enough that he'd had to live with the consequences of defeating Voldemort that night? Would he be saddled forever with unreasonable expectations and fame he couldn't even begin to comprehend?

Yes, yes he would, and James was apparently bastard enough to leave his son to it. He may have made grand promises once when Harry was a tender little babe, but when his son actually needed him, he had retreated to his ancestral home to wallow in misery and guilt.

He had never intended for it to be like this. He had never planned to be here at his parents' manor drinking himself into oblivion night after night. All he had needed was time to wrap his mind around his guilt in losing Harry, and then he was going to go home to his wife. But without Lily there to balance him out, to talk sense into him, he sank further and further into depression, and if he was honest with himself, madness as well. It was madness not to be with Lily, who

he loved passionately since he was hardly more than a child. It was madness not to knock down the door day after day begging to see the son he missed so miserably for twelve years. It was madness to ignore the daughter who brought him back to life and gave him reason to smile every single day of his life.

Now it all felt too late. It felt like Harry would never need him, now that he had Lily and Sirius. It felt like Lydia would never forgive him for betraying her trust and leaving her when she needed him most. And it felt like Lily had been right, all those years ago, when she called him vile names and rebuffed him at every turn. She was right not to want him, right not to love him, right to insist on better for herself.

She gave everything to him. She stood by him, when his father died in their last year at Hogwarts. Their relationship was just starting then, but she had been as fierce a protector and as gentle a love as any witch could be. She put her faith in him when the world was crumbling around them. She took a chance to love him and start a life with him even as others fled the coming war. And then she promised a lifetime with him, with all its joys and pains, and she gave him his two beautiful, perfect children with all of her heart and all of her kindness.

James vanished the firewhiskey in disgust with himself and the depths he had sunk to. He needed to make this right, if he ever could again, but first he needed to be sober and clear-headed and focused. He would not win back his family in a drunken haze. He would be no good to his hurting son or his confused daughter or his lonely wife if he couldn't stand up and be a man for them. Resolved, he hauled himself out of the kitchen and dragged his weary, aching body to the sofa, collapsing into its welcoming cushions.

James was dreaming of his wife when the sound of Apparition stirred him from his Firewhiskey-induced haze. He blinked heavily, groaning at the bright lights assaulting his senses. Confused, he dragged himself up and rubbed at his bleary eyes. "Lil?" he mumbled.

Without warning, his arms shot behind his back, and he felt the harsh burn of ropes as his wrists were bound together. He cried out, snapping immediately from the drunken blur and instinctively

searching for his wand. He spotted it on the table, but before he could spring up, his ankles were bound as well.

"Who the-" he began, fighting valiantly against the restraints as his eyes frantically searched the room for his assailant. For a blissful instant, his mind convinced him it was Sirius here for a prank, but before the question was even out of his mouth, he spotted a face he hadn't seen in twelve years.

The years had not been kind to him. The formerly soft, pudgy frame was hollowed and skeletal, yellowed eyes peering out of bony sockets. There was madness there, madness that chilled James to the bone. He was looking into the face of the traitor who sold him to Voldemort, the man he once considered a brother and a friend before one hideous betrayal destroyed the world as he knew it. Peter's hair was long and unwashed, the stench rolling off of him in waves. James didn't understand, couldn't comprehend how this was happening, but he felt as though he was staring at death itself. There was nothing left of the man he had known, only the twisted spectre of a friend dead to him so many years ago.

For years he had imagined seeing Pettigrew again. He had been so determined to see that the man suffered, and he had it all planned in his mind, what he would say, what he would do to him. He entertained elaborate revenge fantasies that would never come to pass but appeased just a bit of his bloodlust.

None of it mattered now. He had been caught unaware, attacked in his family home when he least expected it. A voice in the back of his mind (the one that sounded like Lily's) scolded the drinking that left him vulnerable, but he was too shocked now for regret or self-recrimination.

Pettigrew was here, in his house, with his wand pointed at his heart. His own wand was out of reach, and barring a miracle, he was about to be killed. He would be murdered by the man who tried to murder his son, murdered by a man he had once fought for and defended. "What?" he croaked, his mind suddenly jolting into overdrive as panic began coursing through his veins.

"James," Pettigrew greeted, his voice raspy and far more chilling than James had remembered.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"You made it easy," the traitor taunted, a maniacal edge to his tone. "They said you would. They said you were here, that you wouldn't have changed the wards. So easy...always so confident, James, so how does it feel? How does it feel to be bested by little Wormtail?"

Oh God, the wards. The wards on the manor. He never changed them...hadn't seen the need, hadn't even thought about it.

"Figured it out, haven't you? They said it would happen. I didn't know, at first, but you really are just the same, aren't you?"

Pettigrew twisted the wand in his hand, and the faces of James's family flashed before his eyes. Lily, the last time her, so strong and determined but so imploring, so full of love and forgiveness and yearning. Lydia, his sweet baby girl, her perfect little face always shining with sweetness and grace. And Harry...God, Harry. He first remembered the round little face of a giggling infant, and then the slimmed, grown up face of a boy who was nearly his twin. Except for those eyes, his mum's beautiful eyes, hiding a million hurts but radiating courage.

He never took his son in his arms. Yesterday, while sorting out the press at Sirius's house, he ached to hold his boy and was too much a coward to go to him. He never got to look in his eyes and tell him how much he loved him, how wonderfully proud he was, how entirely undeserving he felt of a kid so strong and so perfect and so forgiving. He didn't want to die, not now, not like this, not without Harry knowing how desperately he was loved. Lily and Sirius and Lydia would all try to convince him, but Harry would never truly understand. He would have to live all his life with that nagging doubt, always there in the back of his mind.

James wanted to live for his son. He had been gathering his own wits about him, taking his time to come around, and he needed another day, another hour, another moment to run his hands through Harry's hair and kiss his forehead and tell him, just once, that he meant everything in the world. But how could he live through this without his wand? Pettigrew would have been no match for him if he hadn't fallen asleep in a drunken stupor; James would have fought with all he had in him, and his power and talent surpassed Pettigrew's by far. But he acted the fool, drank himself to confusion,

overlooked the obvious and underestimated the danger. He should have expected backlash after Harry's survival came to light, he should have expected someone to come after him, even if it wasn't Pettigrew.

Better yet, he should have been at Grimmauld, with his son, or in Godric's Hollow, with his wife. The wards were re-erected against Pettigrew there, and they would have been entirely safe.

Desperate, but seeing no way out, he began to talk. Peter's weakness had always been his desire to be liked and admired; if he could play to that, play on the madness bursting out of him, perhaps he could convince him not to do this, to spare him just this once. "Why?" he asked. "Why would you do this to me? To Lily? You swore to protect us, Peter, just as we would have done for you."

"Do you know what Dementors do? Not the first time, or even the second, but after days and weeks and years?" Peter asked, ignoring him altogether.

"Peter," he pleaded. "Peter, you were my friend."

"Wasn't. Never was. Sirius and Remus, but not me, never me."

"Of course you were. Peter, we were brothers. Don't you remember? Remember all of our full moons? We helped you with your Animagus, we helped you every day. Remember? The Marauders, Peter. We would have done anything for you. But it doesn't have to end like this. I'm an Auror, I could help you!"

"He's more powerful than you, James. More powerful than you could ever hope to be. He'll be back, and he'll welcome me. They promised...promised I'll be the hero."

"Who? Who promised? They lied, Peter. You've been gone a long time. Things are different now. You don't want to be on their side anymore, Pete. I can help you. We can make things all right again, but you have to let me go, all right?"

"Sorry James, I can't do that," Pettigrew shook his head, his mouth twisting upward in a sick, demented grin. And James knew there was nothing left of the friend from before, nothing left of a good boy who just wanted power and protection and popularity. Somehow had

gotten to him, long before tonight, and tainted him. There was nothing but evil left now, and James knew his time was up. "The Dark Lord will return, James. I'll be the hero. You're just a symbol, they said, and your boy...he'll be next. But the Dark Lord needs him first, and once you're gone, we'll get him easy enough."

"You won't," James shot back. "Go ahead and kill me, Peter, but Harry will be safe. You won't get a filthy hand on him. You won't breathe the air he breathes. You caught me, I admit it, but you're nothing, Peter, you've always been nothing, and you are no match for the people who love my son. Sirius will demolish you, and that's only if there's enough of you left after Lily's finished with your worthless hide."

Pettigrew just grinned even more. He looked every bit the rat, and James wondered how he had never seen it. Padfoot was proud and loyal, his own form was noble and strong, and Peter was a rat, only a little rat. "You think you can scare me," Peter smiled. "Never afraid of little Wormtail. Wormtail is too stupid...no one would expect him."

"You'll be figured out. You will not win this battle."

"Do you want to know what I've learned since school, Prongs? Would you like a little taste? Dark Magic, James, the magic you were never man enough to try."

He shot a curse, and James felt a burning pain in his gut unlike he'd ever felt before in his life. It was as though he was boiling from the inside out, as though his insides were melting and turning themselves out. He could not hold back the cry of agony, horror sweeping through him at the thought of dying like this, screaming and alone and without ever seeing his family again.

The pain ended a moment later and left him panting and breathless, his muscles spasming with the echoes of pain. Another curse hit him, less gruesome this time but still painful, but now he held back his screams, gritting his teeth together and refusing to give Pettigrew the satisfaction of seeing him cry. There was nothing left for him now except a bit of dignity, a chance to deny Pettigrew all that he wanted here in his last moments.

Another curse, and James doubled over but still made no sound. He fought through the pain, the image of his son in his mind keeping

him strong. I love you, I love you, I love you, he thought desperately, hoping Harry might somehow hear and understand.

Then something happened. Then that image of his son, the one he held in his mind, grew frantic and scared instead of brave and strong. James knew his boy wasn't there, but he heard his voice anyway. "Fight, Dad," Harry was begging. "Please fight for me."

And it didn't matter if James was hearing things; his son asked, and he would not deny him again. He immediately began to thrash viciously against his restraints, ignoring the burns the ropes dug into his skin. He kicked with all his might, freeing his ankles and leaping from the sofa. Hands, he needed his hands, and then his wand, and he could-

The fireplace flahsed green, startling Pettigrew enough to turn his back. Figuring it must be the Aurors or Sirius, James took what very well might be his last opportunity to dive for his wand. It was awkward and clumsy, but he managed to drop and scoop it up with his tied hands. Just as he freed himself at last, a wide-eyed figure stepped out of the fireplace.

But it wasn't the Aurors. It wasn't Sirius. It wasn't Remus or Lily or any of the people James held vague hope of rescuing him.

It was Harry.

Harry was curled up on the sofa trying in vain to focus on a book, his mind drifting to the events since yesterday. His mum was still at Hogwarts, sorting things out for Lydia, and Sirius was in his office answering owls from reporters, and Harry himself was trying very hard not to think about what he had done or his father's reaction...or lack thereof.

He started a letter to his dad this morning, hoping it might get through to him, but then he could never bring himself to finish it. The words never felt quite right. Nothing he said seemed good enough, nothing seemed to express what he wanted his dad to know. And so it sat, abandoned, on the desk in his room, likely never to be finished.

He had done something courageous yesterday, but now he felt very much a coward. His family needed him; he was the only one who could bring James back now, but he couldn't find the words to do it.

Heaving a giant sigh, he set the book aside and contemplated a snack to take his mind off things. He wandered into the kitchen in search of Kreacher, and as usual, the elf was happy to serve. Sirius had been at it a while, so perhaps he would appreciate tea and his favourite biscuits. Harry made sure to make the request sound entirely selfish; Kreacher hated doing things for Sirius, and then the little elf scampered away to do his bidding.

Just as he sat down at the table, he heard the fireplace in the sitting room. He started, intending to yell for Sirius, but then the fire made a terrible shrieking noise, and he instinctively went to cover his ears. The house soon echoed with Sirius's rushed footsteps down the stairs, and the sound abruptly ended as Sirius answered the call.

Curious, Harry crept out towards the sitting room.

"What do you mean?" Sirius was asking and sounding oddly hysterical. "Pettigrew couldn't escape. He was in Azkaban. In highest security. You don't just escape from-"

"Well, he did," a gruff voice growled from the fire. "During morning checks, he was reported missing from his cell. The guards have searched everywhere. He isn't there. We don't have the first bloody clue what happened, but you can bet I've a scandal on my hands! Bastard had inside help, no doubt about it!"

Sirius uttered a stream of curses Harry had never even heard before. Everything went white for a moment as terrible understanding washed over him; Pettigrew...that was the man who betrayed his parents, the man who handed them to Voldemort. He was in prison, Sirius said, locked away in maximum security never to be seen or heard from again.

Only now he was missing. Now he was free. And if Sirius sounded panicked, Harry knew there was good reason for it.

"What's being done?" his godfather demanded. "Do I need to report? We have to find him, Rufus, we can't just-"

"I've no intention of allowing a madman free range, Black! Of course we'll find him, but I need you to find Potter! Now!"

Harry felt his heart quiver in his chest. Potter? Did that mean him, or...

"Find Potter? James?" Sirius questioned. "Hasn't he been alerted? He has to know this. He'll be frantic! God, Lily! And Lydia! What's being done at Hogwarts? Do we need to-"

"Black!" the man in the fire roared. "I will deal with this whole bloody mess. You find Potter and get him here in the next ten minutes, or I swear you will both be permanently removed from this department!"

"You're not making sense!" Sirius argued. "Why hasn't he been called in? He's on duty, his emergency-"

"We activated his emergency alert, Black. I do know my own protocol!"

Sirius was silent for a long, horrible moment. "Have you been there? To the manor?" he asked, his voice oddly quiet. Harry could hear the blood pumping in his ears, and he groped weakly for the wall to hold himself up.

His dad was missing. Peter Pettigrew, the traitor, escaped from prison today, and now his dad was missing. He hadn't responded to some sort of emergency call from work, and no one knew where he was, if he was all right.

Sirius kept talking in hushed but terrified tones. "I'll go," he was offering. "But...you've probably put it together now, Harry is with me. I'll call Hogwarts, have Remus come and stay with him. I'll find him," he promised. "He was upset, and if he skivved today, he's probably had too much to drink. I'll find him," he repeated.

"You bloody well better. Both of you, Black. He may be the father of The Boy Who Lived, or whatever they're calling him but-"

"I understand, Rufus!" Sirius snapped. "He'll be there! But don't you-"

Sirius continued on with some tirade against the man he was speaking to, but Harry was no longer interested in the conversation. A plan was forming in his mind, impulsive and reckless and quite frankly insane, but he didn't care. His dad was missing, and he had

a feeling, a horrible, horrible feeling that something was wrong, that his dad wasn't just drunk or sleeping or ignoring a call from his boss. If Pettigrew escaped, it was because of Harry's decision yesterday, it was because everyone knew he was alive and maybe they wanted revenge.

Whatever it was, whatever had happened, Harry couldn't do nothing. He just got a family for the first time in his life, and he hadn't even had time yet to talk to his dad, to show him the new spells he had learned, or have his dad teach him to ride a broom. He'd never been home with his whole family, never experienced life with a mum and a dad and a sister. He wanted it, needed it, and his dad might be hurt and alone somewhere. Sirius had other things to do, like seeing to Lydia and Mum, and Harry could do this – he knew he could.

There was a fireplace in the upstairs study, and he'd seen where Sirius kept the Floo powder. It was stealing, but Sirius always insisted he could help himself to anything. This probably wasn't what he had in mind, but he would forgive him when all of it was over and everyone was safe. He checked his pocket, making sure he had the spare wand Sirius had given him to use, and listened for the sound of his godfather's voice downstairs. Sirius was still at the fireplace, giving Harry time to escape before his absence was noticed.

The first place to look was the manor. It was where his dad was meant to be staying, and it seemed no one had been there yet. Yesterday Sirius called James on the Floo, so Harry even knew how to get there.

His heart raced with terror for his dad and the trouble he was about to find himself in, but he forced himself not to think on it. Sirius wouldn't hurt him, no matter how angry he was, and he could handle shouting just as he always had before. It might hurt a bit more, coming from Sirius, but he couldn't risk this, couldn't risk his dad's life, couldn't risk what very well might be his last chance to know his father.

Holding his breath, Harry tossed a handful of powder into the fireplace and waited for the flames to shoot up green. "Potter Manor!" he called as he clenched his eyes shut and jumped inside.

The ride was jarring and nauseating, longer than Apparating but less squeezing. He stumbled out of the fireplace and tripped over his

own feet, struggling to regain his equilibrium. His head spun crazily for a moment, his glasses clouded with soot. He took them off and wiped them on his jumper, replacing them and breathing in deep.

"Harry! No!" his dad shouted, and before Harry even had time to react, he was doubled over and collapsing to the ground. He'd been hit with something, something hard and painful, and he coughed and tried to clear his lungs.

"How sweet," a sickening voice drawled. Harry shivered and looked up into the face he knew could only belong to Peter Pettigrew. The man was hideous, shrivelled and wasted and reeking of sweat and filth and evil. But then Harry's dad was just behind him, and he was whole and alive and Harry nearly sobbed at the joy of it. Peter Pettigrew was here, but so was his dad, and he knew nothing was going to happen to him.

"Get away from him, you disgusting rat!" James shouted, firing a curse at Pettigrew. "Harry, run!" he demanded.

Harry jumped up, but he had no intention of running. Instead, he retrieved his wand from his pocket and tried to remember some of the curses Sirius had taught him. He fired one, but Pettigrew ducked the red light and managed to avoid it. In response, he turned and hurled something at Harry's dad. This time the curse hit its target, and his dad cried out in pain.

Furious, Harry tried again, this time managing to retrieve Pettigrew's wand just as Sirius demonstrated. James roared in triumph, and Harry felt his heart swell with pride for a flicker of an instant.

Then suddenly, he couldn't breathe. Pettigrew had his arm around his neck, squeezing, and Harry dropped both of their wands. "Get away from him, Pettigrew!" his dad demanded once more.

"Or what, James? You won't dare to hit me, not when I have your blessed son here with me. You'll hit him, you know. I'll throw him in the way. Would you really curse your own son?"

Do it, Dad! Do it, Harry pleaded silently.

But his dad hesitated, a look of horror filling his eyes. Harry met his gaze, and he saw the love there, saw the unspoken apology, saw the misery and the helplessness and the fear.

"Well, Prongs? Go ahead, show us what you can do." He dug the tip of his wand into Harry's throat, and Harry began to wheeze, his airway constricting further. Rage flashed in his father's eyes, and Harry continued his silent prayer, begging his father to do it. His vision started to go a little fuzzy, blackness crowding in along the edges. His dad wasn't going to do it, couldn't do it, at the risk of hitting Harry, and Harry knew he had to do something.

Summoning all of this strength, he began to writhe fiercely against Pettigrew's hold. He kicked and flailed as hard as he could, until finally Pettigrew stumbled backwards and released his grasp. Harry ducked and rolled away, and he heard his dad shout another curse. This one landed, and Pettigrew toppled towards the ground as Harry ran.

"Thank God, Harry!" his dad cried, opening his arms to embrace him. Harry did not hesitate to throw himself into his dad's arms, sobbing with relief that he was free and his dad was still alive. "Are you all right?" his dad asked frantically. "Can you talk? Can you breathe?"

"Y-yeah," he choked out, his voice a little raspy but his breath returning to him.

"Thank God. It's all right, Love. You're all right," his dad promised, smoothing back his hair and pressing a quick kiss to his forehead. "Let me take care of this. Don't watch, Harry."

James released his grasp, but Harry couldn't obey. He had to see what his dad was going to do. "You filthy, disgusting rat," he accused, waving his wand over the cowering Pettigrew.

"Have mercy, James! Please!" Pettigrew begged. "They made me! They said I had to...or...I couldn't! Please, let me-"

"Who?" James demanded. "Tell me who did this. Tell me who let you out."

"I can't!" Pettigrew sobbed. "They'll kill me! They said I had to kill you, or they would kill me!"

"What do they want?"

"They want Harry!" Pettigrew continued to wail, and Harry stiffened in fear. "I don't know why! They wouldn't tell me! But they said I had to kill you first, and then we'd get him, when everyone was mourning you and distracted! They'd snatch him, and-"

"Did you really think I would let you hurt my family again?" James scoffed in disdain. "You tried before, Peter. You tried, but you failed. Harry is still here. Your master wasn't even strong enough to defeat an infant. You put your faith in the wrong person, Peter, in the wrong side, but that's over now. You'll never run snivelling to him again. You're mine. It's ending now. You will pay for what you did to my family, what you did to my son."

Harry watched, intrigued but horrified, as his dad raised his wand. He heard the beginning of a curse, but he couldn't explain what happened next.

"NO!" he cried, darting out and knocking his dad's arm away. "Please, don't!"

"Harry!" his dad cried in alarm, whirling again to face Pettigrew. But it was too late. Before anyone could reach him again, Pettigrew had snatched his wand off the ground and vanished right before their eyes.

"No!" Harry whimpered, shame rushing through him as he realised what he'd done. He'd only wanted to stop his dad from killing the man, hadn't wanted vengeance like that done in his name. He wanted Peter Pettigrew back in Azkaban where he belonged, but he didn't want to see his dad turn into a murderer. "I'm sorry!" he cried in panic. "I'm sorry! I'm so...I just didn't want you to have to kill him! I didn't-"

"Shh, shh," his dad hushed him, dropping down beside him and taking him in his arms once more.

"I'm sorry!" he sobbed again, sick with the knowledge that he had let that awful man go, that his actions allowed him to escape. They'd never be safe now, and it was all his fault. Everyone would be so

furious with him for his foolishness, for acting without thinking and allowing their attacker to go free.

But then his dad squeezed him tight and pressed a long kiss to the top of his head. "Listen," he demanded gruffly, his voice firm and strong but filled with a sort of protective love that quickly began to quell the anxieties. "Listen," his dad repeated again, softer this time. "You did beautifully. I am so proud of you, Harry. You kept your head, you fought your hardest, and you showed mercy most would never dream of. You don't have a thing to be sorry for. Not one. You understand?"

Harry forced himself to nod, clinging tightly to his dad's arms. A chill shook his bones as he suddenly recalled all that transpired in the last few minutes, from arriving here and finding his dad in danger to Pettigrew's wand against his throat. It all happened so quickly...

"Harry? Harry, talk to me, Love," he heard his dad encouraging distantly.

"I...I wasn't supposed to...I took the Floo powder...I heard Sirius talking and I got scared. I thought you might be...and I..." he rambled uselessly.

"No one is going to be mad at you. That was a reckless thing you did, but very brave, also, and you probably saved my life. Everything is all right now. Try and relax," his dad calmed him, smoothing down his hair and kissing him again. Harry just burrowed further into his dad's embrace, too relieved to be embarrassed. "Go ahead and cry if you need to. No shame in it."

Harry choked on a little sob, but the warm embrace was helping. The chills began to subside, and he finally pulled away enough to look his dad in the eye. It was the first time they had ever really done that, and he saw tears glistening in James Potter's hazel eyes. "I was scared," he admitted quietly. "Sirius was talking to someone, and they said he escaped and you hadn't answered some kind of emergency..."

"Emergency alert," his dad provided, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small medallion. "All Aurors on-duty have one, so we can be summoned quickly. I turned mine off," he admitted. "It's my

fault. And then I fell asleep until he came. You had perfect timing, Love."

"He could have really hurt you," Harry protested shakily.

"Only because I was a fool," his dad confessed, self-disgust dripping from his words. "But that isn't going to happen again. Not ever, Harry," he promised. "And you will never again go anywhere that I can't protect you. I love you, Harry. I should have told you that the first day I saw you, and every day after. But I'm never going anywhere again. I can't make it up to you but I can at least-"

"I just want you to come home," Harry cut him off. He had no interest in apologies anymore. He was so tired of the blame, so tired of the guilt, so tired of everyone being so sad all the time and so afraid of hurting him. He just wanted to be normal, to have a family who laughed and smiled and could just forget all of this ever happened to them. He just wanted his dad to hug him like this, and teach him to fly, and take him to get his own wand.

"I will," James promised. "Your mum may have my head for this, but that's a risk I'll have to take."

"She won't," Harry shook his head. "I know she really missed you."

"I missed her, Harry. I missed all of you. I hope you believe that," his dad said sincerely. "Because I know I certainly haven't shown you what a dad is supposed to be. But perhaps I ought to start right now...let me see your neck," he insisted.

Harry was confused at first, but as soon as his dad manipulated his neck, he understood. He winced a little in pain as gentle fingers prodded sore skin; Pettigrew must have grabbed him awfully hard, and he'd almost forgotten about the brief moment when he felt darkness closing in on him.

"Quite a bruise, mate," his dad tsked. "How does it feel?"

"Kind of sore," Harry admitted.

"I should think so." Fingers ghosted over the bruises again, and suddenly he was being kissed on the forehead again. "You are very brave, Harry."

Harry felt his cheeks colour and ducked his head. "I was just scared," he mumbled. "That he might have hurt you."

"He would have if you hadn't come. But Harry," his dad sighed, "that was so dangerous. You should have gotten Sirius. You should have-

"I know," Harry cut him off, "but-"

"Shh. I don't want to lecture you now. I'm the one who messed up tonight, not you. I just need you to know that your life comes first, and I don't want you to ever put yourself in danger like that again."

That felt like an awfully big promise, but Harry just nodded.

"Good boy," his dad said affectionately. "Your mum will fix this right up. Her Bruise Balm is legendary. But are you hurting anywhere else? Does anything feel funny?"

Well, his stomach was suddenly feeling rather warm at his father's concern, but somehow, he didn't think that was the right answer. "No," he shook his head. "I'm all right."

"Thank God," his dad sighed.

Before either of them could say another word, the fireplace surged with green flames, followed almost immediately by Sirius's frantic call. "James! Tell me he's there! Tell me you know where-"

With a rueful smile, James patted Harry's head and leaned into the fireplace. "He's here. We're both fine."

There was another long stream of curses, and Harry was really rather impressed with his godfather's vocabulary today. "He may not be when Lily and I are through with him. Nearly gave me a heart attack, Prongs. Both of you. And Lily..."

"How bad?" James winced, and Harry felt new stirrings of dread in his stomach. Though, come to think of it, he really wasn't as scared as he felt he should be. Normally the mere idea of someone being angry with him would send him to pieces, but after what he just lived through, it no longer seemed the end of the world. And he also knew

that despite the threat, the worst he would get from Sirius and his mum was a hug so hard it nearly crushed him.

"Can you come on through so we can see both of you in one piece?" Sirius requested.

"Be right there."

Harry's dad turned to him and gave him a crooked grin.

"Time to face the music, mate. Let me teach you one trick, though. Let's see your best guilty look," he prompted.

Harry's grin threatened to ruin the effect, but he did as he was told.

"Perfect," his dad beamed. "You'll be fine."

A few moments later, they were both tumbling out of the fireplace into Grimmauld Place. Harry's mum was first to react and went frantically to his side, quickly gathering him into a hug and nearly squeezing the life out of him. "Oh thank God!" she cried. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

He couldn't speak for being squeezed, and his dad came to his rescue. "Let him breathe, Lily. He's not hurt. A little bruised, but nothing serious."

"Bruised?" she asked worriedly. She moved back and began a thorough inspection for injuries, immediately zooming in on the tender spots on his neck. "What is this?"

"Pettigrew grabbed him," his dad explained again. "But he's all right. Perhaps some Bruise Balm?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll go retrieve some in just a few minutes. You're not hurt anywhere else?" she asked Harry, cradling his face in her hands and kissing his forehead. He shook his head, and she held him close for another moment before drawing back. "What were you thinking, Harry?" she demanded suddenly. "Do you have any idea what was going through my mind when Sirius told me you were missing?"

"I'm sorry," he answered quietly.

"That was so reckless, Harry! Sirius was taking care of it, and-

"Lily," his dad shook his head. "He knows he should have gotten help first, but the truth is, he saved me. Pettigrew was about to pull it off. Perhaps we can spare the lecture for later, when he's had a bit of rest?"

Harry's mum immediately pulled him back into a fierce hug. "Of course, Sweetheart," she murmured. "You must have been so frightened."

"I'm all right. Dad was there," he answered quietly.

"And Harry did brilliantly," his dad added. "You were so brave, Love. We're so proud of you."

"I wasn't," Harry shook his head. "I was scared, and I didn't tell Sirius I was"-

"We'll worry about it later," his mum hushed him. "Your dad is right. You need a rest first."

"And there's no shame in being scared. I was terrified when he grabbed hold of you. I couldn't hurt him without hurting you, but you broke free. You did exactly what I needed you to do."

"You're safe, Harry," his mum murmured. "And you did a very brave thing. Let's have some cocoa and relax, all right?"

Harry turned uncertainly to his father, suddenly panicked that he might leave. He wanted to be able to see him tonight, to know Pettigrew hadn't killed him and that he was really right here with them. "I don't want you to go. Please stay," he implored.

His father dropped down next to him and hugged him nearly as tightly as his mum had a moment ago. "Always," he whispered. "Always."

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